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OUT OF BONDAGE

by

MARTIN HOLT

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OUT OF BONDAGE.

BY

"MARTIN HOLT."

pseud. of Ross, Henry M.



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OUT OF BONDAGE.

CHAPTER I.

RENIE'S FREEDOM.

THE butcher pulled his wagon up short, and driving in close to the roadside, jerked his head in the direction of the villa.

"How is she? Have you heard?"

The young woman leaning over the gate looked interested. The butcher was also young, just in business on his own account; and, according to all reports, a thoroughly desirable *parti*. A girl could do worse than marry the butcher, especially since, if the people liked him, trade would grow. She wondered where he'd expect her to live — over the store, of course; he had some money, or he couldn't risk starting a brand-new business in a place where Ted Hopkinson had occupied the field for so long, though of course Ted Hopkinson—

"Sa-a-y," said the butcher, leaning out of the wagon. "You heard me?"

The young woman came back to earth again with a start, and gave the butcher one of her sweetest smiles.

"You mean Mis' Sherwood? I heard—yes. She's mighty poorly."

"So!" said the young man in a thoughtful manner.

He was a pleasant fellow, round-faced, with a sandy mustache; his eyes were light blue, and his complexion was florid. Very much

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so. Nevertheless, he was an honest-looking chap. He kept staring in that thoughtful way at Matilda Todgins, and she colored a little. Not a misgiving entered her mind then but that she had made an impression. The future seemed at once very promising to a young woman whose chances had been growing slimmer this past five years. She would have her curtains tied back with pink satin ribbons, like Mrs. Sherwood's own; she would have that set of china she saw down at Mellon's . . .

"Ain't no chance of seeing anybody at the house, then?" he asked.

The young woman looked puzzled.

"Seeing anybody?" she ventured.

"Why, yes. That there young girl who does the running for Mrs. Sherwood, and the errands."

Down came the castle in Spain; the pink satin ribbons floated away in air; the china-set melted before her very eyes.

"You mean Mis' Sherwood's hired girl? I don't know anything about Mis' Sherwood's servants."

She spoke frostily indeed. The unwise young tradesman bent farther toward her.

"She's too durned pretty to be Mrs. Sherwood's hired girl," he said. His face was very red, for he was a bashful fellow, and this was saying a great deal. He sat up straight and chirruped to his horse. "You kin tell her that—tell her I said so," he went on, leaning out with a confidential air. "You won't lose nothin' by it," he concluded, as if that would cause her to decide in his favor.

The young woman looked after the retreating wagon. It went very slowly until it reached the white villa, and very, very slowly past it. There was an undescribable expression on her face.

"My name ain't Matilda Todgins if he doesn't get a setdown,"

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she said. "Renie to look at him! That one gives herself the airs of a princess." She turned back to the house, still ruminating. "Mis' Sherwood's a mighty hard woman, but she'll surely leave Renie a few thousands for all she's been to her these past years. She's certainly had a hard time."

She stood in the path a moment, letting her eyes run along the road once more. What she saw brought her back to the front gate in a hurry.

"Hello, you Renie!" she said.

"Hello!" said Renie.

She was trudging wearily along, her sunbonnet in her hand, a small white paper parcel in the other. She looked tired.

"How's Mis' Sherwood?" asked Matilda.

"Just the same—isn't any change," said Renie. She waited, leaning against the fence. "I'm about done up."

"You look it," said Matilda, not unkindly. "Had breakfast?"

Renie colored.

"Kind of," she admitted.

"There's some coffee," suggested Matilda, eagerly.

"No," said Renie, indifferently. "I don't want any, thank you. She's really suffering—and she'll be missing me. I've got new powders here. Dr. Sells is afraid she can't last much longer."

"Pretty tough when a woman like her gets down that bad," said Matilda. "Ain't no hope, I'm thinking—she's too old. You'll miss her, Renie."

"Yes," said Renie, pressing her lips together. "I'll miss her. I must go now. Thanks, Matilda," she added, in a softer tone.

"Oh, don't mention it," said Matilda, loftily. Renie always looked and made people feel as if she were far above them in her endeavor to be grateful—she couldn't help it. The girl walked on.

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"Oh, Renie!" called Matilda.

Again the girl paused. "Some one was asking for Mis' Sherwood—and for you, too. You needn't to worry—no matter what comes. You've got a sweetheart, Renie."

Renie's eyes blazed.

"Don't you say that to me, Matilda Todgins," she said. "I haven't any sweetheart, and I don't want any. And once I can get away from this old, nasty, meddling, contrary little town, I won't want anybody to take care of me! I can take care of myself!"

Matilda grew very angry—but Renie did not wait for a reply. Her face was flushed, and tears were trembling in her eyes. She had been awake all night, and her breakfast had been a drink of well water. So she was tired and miserable now, unfit to converse with any one, or to listen to any remarks. Besides that, she had always felt that the whole village of Broadplains was inimical to her. She hated it; her heart was sick of it.

She swung the villa gate open and shut it to softly. At the door the old woman who was the nominal housekeeper met her.

"You've been mighty long," she said.

"Took 'most half an hour to put up the powders," said Renie. "Better give her one right away? I'll mix it."

The old woman put her hand on the girl's arm.

"Come down and have a cup of tea. She don't want no powders."

Renie fell back against the door.

"You don't mean—"

"Yes, she's dead."

"Dead!" said Renie. "Oh, no!"

"She died a half hour ago," said the woman, stolidly. "I sent the boy to the undertaker, an' to tell Mis' Wilson come help lay

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her out. She's got to be made ready decent, even if she was Mis' Sherwood."

But Renie could only stare at her helplessly.

"Oh, the poor thing!" she said, with a young girl's pity stirring at her heart. "Oh, the poor thing! Dead! Were you with her, Jane?"

"Yes, I was with her. She just leaned over an' died," said the woman, as if she were relating a very ordinary event. "Great woman, Mis' Sherwood. She wouldn't 'a' died if she could 'a' helped it."

Renie was in no mood to see the humor of this remark. She was sorry, and her sorrow blotted out the resentment she had always felt toward an unkind taskmistress.

"Just leaned over an' died," repeated Jane. "I straightened her up and shut her eyes. An' then I came away an' left her."

"Oh," said Renie, shuddering. "Please don't, Jane. I'm afraid."

"What's to be afraid of?" queried philosophical Jane. "She's dead now—dead an' done for, an' that's sure."

"It's seems so awful," said Renie, in little panting breaths. She covered her eyes with her hands. "It doesn't seem natural—death doesn't. I never saw death, Jane—but when you think how you breathe and talk and sing and laugh—and then death comes. Aren't you afraid, Jane?"

And she began to cry, softly, the tears running down her face. Jane pulled her inside and shut the door to, and gradually led her toward the kitchen, where the table was set and a nice little breakfast made ready.

"I thought she wouldn't get down anyhow for a day or so, even if she did pull through," said Jane. "So I helped myself to a

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chicken. You just taste that, Renie. It's creamed—the way I fix it for Mr. Jason himself when he comes from the city. An' I got some of the best tea, too—not the shoddy article she's been landin' out to us this last five years. Poor soul! Lord pity her, but she was the tight-fisted woman. No luck goes with money that tight-fisted. Stop your crying now, Renie, and set down, that's a dear child. Though God knows what you got to cry about, I dunno."

"I just can't help it," said Renie, sobbing. "Death seems so sorrowful—and there was no one to say a prayer—not one. Oh, I am so sorry, Jane. Please, Jane, don't be angry with me, but I'm so sorry."

Jane shut her thin lips.

"The world'll knock that tender heart out of you," she said. "Though your life here shouldn't 'ave left much tenderness in you. I'm as easy-going as the next one, child, but my blood's sometimes been at the boiling-point at all you've had to stand up to. An' I'll bet you hav'n't one penny to show for it—not a thing but the rags on your back."

"Oh, Jane," said Renie, "don't bring back mean things now. Maybe she couldn't help it—something must have made her like that, and God will know the reason. Besides, I'm strong and I'm young, and I didn't mind hard work. I didn't mind anything at all, did I, Jane, only when I got out of patience and had to run away out into the garden—"

She sobbed bitterly.

"Hush now," said Jane. "Hush now, Renie. Eat something, child—you'll be down yourself."

"I can't eat," said Renie. "Jane, I can't eat."

The old woman went to the stove and poured out a cup of tea. Bringing it back she held it to the girl's lips.

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"Drink," she said.

Used to obedience, Renie took the cup. With some satisfaction Jane sat down and attacked the creamed chicken.

"What can't be cured must be endured," she said. "We can't bring Mis' Sherwood back to life, an' there's no use worrying about it. When we're to go, we're to go, an' that's the end of it. No one can hold on to life one minute more than the Lord wants them to, Renie. And it's flying in God's face to resent death."

Renie was busy with her own thoughts. Her eyes were very red, and she sat with contracted brows staring straight before her.

"Drink your tea, now, an' eat a bit," said Jane.

"I can't," said Renie again, this time impatiently. "I can't eat."

Jane shrugged her shoulders. Then she carefully placed the girl's breakfast on a plate and set it back on the brace of the stove to keep it warm.

"It's here when you want it," she said. "Mis' Wilson'll be up in a few minutes. An' then we'll get the mistress ready. Now, don't you touch the breakfast things, I'll do all that. You're just played out. Go upstairs and go to bed."

Renie shivered. Go upstairs—to bed—to sleep! Oh, no—that was impossible!

"Can't I help you, Jane?" she ventured, timidly.

"No," said Jane, "no, you can't. You'll just go off somewheres an' rest yourself, before it comes your time to think."

Before it comes time to think! Renie did not grasp the import of the words. She felt as if she had lost some great hold on life; she realized a sense of aimlessness that had never been hers. But that was all. She had no thought of the future, or of what her future held. She thought now that it would be wise to get out

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under the grape arbor and cry as much as she wanted to, without Jane seeing her. Jane was a good soul—but Renie felt the difference. She had never been taught to know it—but it was there.

From the tip of her head to the soles of her feet Renie Desmond was a lady. She knew it—her ways, refined and gentle, were hers unconsciously; and this very unconsciousness was her loudest assertion to the claim. The people who knew her might laugh and sneer and talk as they would, considering the menial position that she held in Mrs. Sherwood's household—but the fearlessness and pride of the girl kept them at arm's length. Her very manner had an air of condescension about it.

Renie herself had no realization of this, and would have been greatly hurt had any one told her of it. It was, perhaps, one of the reasons why the cruel woman, over whose death she was weeping, had treated her so bitterly. No one had ever heard Renie Desmond complain; sometimes her white face and drooping figure aroused the pity of the village gossips, and they would discuss her at their afternoon tea, and be sorry for her. Until, perhaps, the same Renie would flash by them, with a rollicking word if the mood so moved her, or a *grande dame* greeting that sent them back to envy again for consolation.

Yes, poor Renie had had a hard life of it since Mrs. Sherwood brought her a child of five, into this handsome, comfortable, substantial mansion. It had been her home for thirteen years. If she had a relative in the world, he or she was unknown to her; she had neither kith nor kin that she was aware of; she had known no home but the institution from which this grim, gray-haired, hard-visaged old woman had brought her, and this. She had to pay for her daily sustenance in hard work, and the bearing of harder censures. She had never, during all that time, received one word of commen-

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dation, one word of praise. It had been the earning of bread to her, but bitter bread, indeed.

Renie Desmond, sitting upon the bench under the grape arbor, found that, having come out here to cry, she could not. The tears were dried up suddenly. The sunshine was filtering through the leaves upon her head. The birds were singing as if death and dying were unknown to the world. The butterflies, hovering about her, settled on the green leaves, winging their way in and out of shadow and light. Renie's heart gave a great bound. How free they were! How glad they were! They could go where they would —go where they pleased—these birds and butterflies. And now she, too, was free! She, too! To go where she pleased and do as she pleased! Free!

She sprang to her feet with that transition from deepest woe to excessive delight that is the happy lot of those who have not yet suffered much at the hands of the world. She threw her arms out.

"Free!" she said. "Oh great, wide, lovely earth! Oh sunshine, oh birds, oh flowers, oh butterflies, I am free—I am free!"

There was a melody in the liquid voice, surely, hidden melody, so clearly sweet did the words ring. With shining eyes she began to walk up and down the soft ground. And that was the burden of her thoughts—freedom. A little bird, pouring out his full-throated warbling close to her, had suddenly found a lovely echo somewhere in her breast. It was alive with joy, throbbing through every vein in the young body; pulsating with every beat of the young heart.

"I am free! I am free!"

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CHAPTER II.

RENIE'S FORTUNE.

JASON SHERWOOD was shown into the back parlor, where his sister-in-law, Mrs. Sherwood, had been "laid out," preparatory to her burial. He was well-built, well-dressed, with an air of prosperity about him that befitted the business man. Shrewd, keen, and clever, he had outgrown the pettiness of suburban ways in the city's larger life. He had had no special love for his brother's wife, not even admiration, despite the fact that she had proven on several occasions that her financial acumen was as keen as his own. He knew her means were not inconsiderable; he knew that her ruling passion had been the accumulation of money, and, as her only relative, it had been incumbent upon him to be present at her obsequies.

Yet neither regret nor curiosity stirred him as Jane opened the door and pointed to the draped black box; then the old woman withdrew and left him alone with the dead.

He was annoyed. Yet he stood looking down at the sharp features, the lips unnaturally closed—a straight, wide, thin line of blue in the pallid face. She had never been prepossessing—she was not prepossessing now. And, more than that, she had been guiltless, ever, of kindly deeds, and there were none now to remember her kindly.

Least of all, Jason Sherwood.

He came out again, unconscious—and if he had known, uncaring, since he was used to the ways of servants—that Jane had kept

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her eye at the keyhole during all his brief scrutiny. His face was sober and grave, as became the occasion. He shut the door of the darkened room after him, and walked slowly along the hall, with a sense of relief.

"Everything has been done very decently," he said to Jane, in his cold voice. "Have there been arrangements for the funeral?"

"No, sir," said Jane. "Leastways, she said to send for Mr. Tuck, the undertaker, in case she died, which we did, an' me and Mis' Wilson, we laid her out. A beautiful corpse, ain't she, Mr. Jason?"

"I have not seen her in over a year—seems to me she looks rather thin. Did she suffer much?"

"Quite some, sir, toward the end. She was always too proud to admit it," Jane went on, "you know how she kept to herself."

Mr. Jason nodded. "Yes, I know."

"No one thought it was more than a slight cold. But double pneumonia, at her age—"

Mr. Jason looked slightly nettled.

"She wasn't old. Sixty isn't old," he said. He himself was fifty-eight, and just thinking of beginning to enjoy life a little. He had spent thirty-five years amassing money.

"No," said Jane. "She was very healthy—until then. It must have come hard on her to die."

Mr. Sherwood smiled cynically.

"It comes hard on most of us," he said. "When was Mr. Ventnor here?"

"The lawyer? About a month ago." Jane dropped her voice mysteriously. "Sir, you're kind-hearted, I know. An' I'm an old woman. Would you allow me— You won't be vexed—"

"What is it?"

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"You promise you won't be angry?"

"No, Jane, I won't be angry." When he smiled his face was not unpleasant.

"It's Renie, Mr. Jason—"

"Renie—Renie? Who— Renie? Oh, you mean the little girl?"

"Yes, sir—I mean her. She's been thirteen years with Mis' Sherwood. A slave, sir. Madam was just enough—I won't say anything against her—but you know, Mr. Jason, you know, how hard she could make things. Renie ain't got a cent to face the world with, sir, an' the thought of her has kept me awake many an hour. She's but eighteen, and that pretty—"

Mr. Sherwood waved his hand carelessly.

"My dear Jane," he said, "I wouldn't be surprised if Maria Sherwood had left every cent to Renie. She would do things by contraries, always. And God knows I won't begrudge it to her. She's earned it. Thirteen years! I didn't think it was that long." He pursed up his lips. "Yes, by Jove, she's earned it, all right, poor child— Where is she?"

"Been wandering about the place like a lost fairy since yesterday. Cryin' fit to break her heart."

"Crying?" Jason Sherwood looked interested. "What for?"

"For Mis' Sherwood," said Jane.

"Don't believe it," declared the man, with emphasis. "She may be worrying about her future, or some other material comfort. She may be ill. But don't tell me she is crying over Maria Sherwood."

He laughed incredulously under his breath, and turning on his heel walked out on the porch of the villa. There was no one there. He came down the steps and paced along the well-kept gravel-path

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to the back of the house, his keen eyes searching for the girl. He meant to come upon her unawares.

And he did. She was standing under the grape arbor trellis, leaning against one of the posts, in fact. Her eyes were fixed on vacancy, her lips curved sadly—the bearing of her figure that of extreme depression. He stood looking at her—then he shook his head. Advancing into the sunlight, he spoke.

"How do you do, Renie Desmond?" he said.

She started, stared at him, and the surprise of seeing "Mr. Jason" sent the blood to her forehead.

"How do you do?" she said, shyly.

He did not know what to say to her, and a pause, embarrassing for both, ensued. At last he moved nearer, and sat down on the bench.

"It is too bad—this trouble," he began.

"Yes," said Renie.

"You must be tired taking care of her. Jane tells me you were very faithful."

"Oh, no," said Renie. "I didn't mind. I am strong, and I am not tired now. Jane won't let me do anything. Have you been in to see Mrs. Sherwood?"

"Yes." And then he smiled. She talked childishly, and he felt that he was answering her likewise. "Have you?"

"I'd like to—but I'm kind of afraid," she said.

"You weren't afraid of her—"

"Oh, my! Oh, yes, I was. I was very much afraid of her."

"Is that so?"

"I was. She was a cross woman, sometimes."

Evidently there wasn't much of an enlivening nature in this conversation.

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"I suppose it is too early to ask you what you intend to do?" he went on.

Renie looked puzzled.

"I—I haven't thought," she answered.

"Would you like to go with me to see Mrs. Sherwood?" he asked. A sudden inspiration had come to him. "You mightn't be afraid any more if you saw her."

"I—I don't know," faltered Renie.

"Oh, come now," he got up on his feet, and spoke imperatively. "Come on—get it over."

The note of command in his voice compelled Renie's obedience. She grew quite pale, but the man did not notice. He had simply made up his mind that it would do the girl good to get rid of a silly feeling. So he went back to the house, she following. There was no reason for hesitation that he could see. He pushed open the door, turned his head to see that she was entering after him, since she would not precede him.

Renie stood looking at the woman who had been her mistress—who had virtually owned her—this past thirteen years. She set her teeth into her underlip to keep back the deep breath—she could feel her heart beat madly. Then, all at once, her whole body seemed to become less rigid. Her eyes, unnaturally large and bright, fixed on the dead face, looked at it. She knelt to say a prayer—and Jason Sherwood, wondering, stood beside her—not understanding the Catholic custom.

"Let us go," said Renie, in a whisper.

He escorted her to the door.

"How do you feel now?" he asked. And the girl looked at him.

"I couldn't realize it," she said. "No, I couldn't. It seemed

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too good to be true. But now I know it is true. I am sure of it."

"What?" curiously.

"That I am free! Oh, it is so good to be free."

Again that curious, inquiring glance.

"Tell me," he said. "You are free—yes. What do you mean to do?"

"I do not know—I can't tell. But it is so sweet—this freedom. I am so proud of it—so glad of it. It is the first thing that has ever belonged to me. I have always wanted something of my very own—and this is mine now—my freedom."

Mr. Jason Sherwood was very much taken aback.

"You funny child," he said. "What are you anyway? Where did you come from? Who are you?"

"I am Renie Desmond—I don't know where I came from, nor who I may be. But I am Renie Desmond."

"And a little lady, if ever there was one," thought Jason Sherwood. A thought came to him then, very suddenly—a thought that almost took his breath away. He was not so old—not altogether gray; well-preserved, good-looking—

"Come here into the parlor—I would like to talk to you," he said.

Renie had never been permitted to enter the Sherwood parlor. But she did not question her right to do so now. She went. Sat down, too, on one of the handsome chairs. And she did not think of Maria Sherwood lying in the closed and darkened room not ten feet away. Nor of what Maria Sherwood would have said to her, seeing her thus.

"Have you a sweetheart?" asked Jason Sherwood. "Are you in love with anybody?"

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Up went the arched eyebrows.

"I?" Then she laughed. "Oh, *no*."

"There is no one at all?"

"No."

He cleared his throat.

"I have a very fine home; I am wealthy; I could give you a good deal, Renie Desmond. You could go traveling—you could see the world. Will you marry me?"

Renie sat looking at him—not startled in any way; simply contemplative.

"I don't want you to make up your mind in a hurry," went on the gentleman. "There isn't any hurry about it. I like you; you've got a fearless, innocent way about you that one sees but rarely nowadays. Of course I don't want to take you without a full understanding. My first wife has been dead fifteen years. I have two daughters—one seventeen and one twenty. The elder is in Paris; the other at school. I have a son of twenty-two—also in Europe. My home is lonely—and I should try to make you happy. Will you marry me?"

"No," said Renie.

"You can give me any reason?"

"You are too old—your hair is gray," said Renie Desmond. "You have false teeth; there are wrinkles around your eyes, and you are getting bald. You would soon be very old. I should have to take care of you—to wait on you. No. I will not marry you—I have been free only for a few days and my freedom is very sweet."

He winced a little under her qualifying words. She was absolutely frank, cool, collected. He admired her, then.

"If I am troubled with illness, I can hire a nurse," he said. "That needn't worry you. And if I am too tired because of old

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age to go with you wherever you will, I can stay at home. I sha'n't expect impossibilities—I sha'n't ask you to love me."

"But I must take the responsibility," argued Renie. "I couldn't be happy if you were sick and I didn't take care of you. That would not be right. I to take everything from you and give you nothing? No, there is no fairness in that. For, of course, that would be the only way I could pay you back—by taking care of you. You see, I *couldn't* love you."

"You are an honest little girl," said Jason Sherwood.

That was all.

Renie went down into the kitchen to Jane, who was preparing creamed chicken for Mr. Jason in the way he liked it best. The girl sat on the table, swinging her feet.

"Say, Jane."

"Yes, Renie?"

"Mr. Jason has just asked me to marry him."

Jane turned around, and her face was a marvel. An artist would have delighted in it. With open mouth and staring eyes, she looked first to see if Renie were in earnest. Then she shoved the cooking-vessel back farther, and wiped her fingers on her apron.

"Renie, child! Renie, you don't mean it."

"Yes, I do." Renie bobbed her head.

"But, child—why, he's the head of a big house—he's as rich as—oh, he's *frightfully* rich! You lucky girl, you lucky girl! When did he ask you, when? And will you marry him now, at once? Renie, Renie, but there's a good day coming for you. You'll take old Jane with you, won't you?" she went on, coaxingly. "You won't find any one faithfuller—"

"Don't be *silly*, Jane!" Renie frowned. "I wouldn't marry him. You go up, Jane. Maybe he'll ask you."

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Not a bit of doubt in the young voice—not a trace of sarcasm—not a question. Jane looked at her suspiciously.

"Go on," urged Renie. "He's just in the humor now—why don't you go, you stupid Jane?"

"Renie," said Jane, solemnly, "you're a fool."

Renie looked startled.

"You're a little idiot," reiterated Jane. "Go right upstairs this very minute, and tell Mr. Jason you've thought it over—Renie, you never said no, finally? You couldn't say no for good—not to such a chance as that. I'm your friend—I've always been your friend. Tell Jane, now, just what you said."

"Oh, I can't," said Renie, and her lips quivered. "If you scold me I shall be miserable again."

"Well, I won't scold you—only tell me."

"He asked me—"

"Yes—go on."

"And I said he was too old; he was bald, and he had false teeth and wrinkles—and I wouldn't marry him for anything. And he has."

"Oh, good gracious," said Jane. "Oh, good gracious me! What a pity—what a pity! There's no chance now, I'm sure—Not after that."

"You're not so old," said Renie. "What is the reason he won't ask you? You're a nice cook—and you won't mind taking care of him if he gets sick—"

"Come," said Jane.

Renie got down off the table. Jane led the way to the kitchen dresser, over which there was a small looking-glass.

"Look there," said Jane. "That's the reason."

Renie looked.

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"Well, of course, Jane, I'm prettier than you," she admitted. "But that isn't everything."

"It's everything with you, Renie," said Jane. "Your face is your fortune."

"Did he want to marry me for my face?" asked Renie, indignantly.

"Not that alone. Jane Weeks is a servant, Renie. You're not—you never will be. That—and your face—make the difference."

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CHAPTER III.

THE STORY RENIE TOLD.

THE day of the funeral Renie rode in the first carriage with Mr. Jason himself. He had provided carriages for all those who cared to attend, and the neighbors and Jane followed the coach of honor in these. Mr. Jason had seen the lawyer, Mr. Ventnor, that morning. Mrs. Sherwood's will was to be filed for probate shortly. In response to Mr. Jason's earnest inquiries, he was informed that Maria Sherwood had left the sum of five hundred dollars to Jane Weeks, and the balance and residue of the entire fortune to Jason Sherwood himself. Renie Desmond's name had not been mentioned.

"There was no reason that you know of for my client's dislike of the girl?" asked Mr. Ventnor.

"None," said Jason Sherwood. "The child was a stranger when she took her in—don't even know where she got her from. Picked her up from some institution, I believe. She had no reason to dislike her. She's a good little soul." He spoke warmly.

"I don't know much about her," said Mr. Ventnor. "The first time I saw her she appeared frightened to death. A black-eyed girl, wasn't she?"

"No—blue," said Mr. Jason, abstractedly. "Or gray—I don't know which. Poor little thing! It's a shame."

"You might—" ventured the lawyer.

"I'll see," said Jason Sherwood.

That was all. During the brief service at the grave the dread of death came upon Renie once more, and she clung to Jason Sher-

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wood's arm, sobbing. She could not tell why she cried—it was certainly not for sorrow. But it showed a gentle spirit that the neighbors mutely commended. Being, on the whole, as good-natured as the rest of human nature, a few of them were debating what they would do with Renie. She could be made useful in many ways in Broadplains. Her abilities were well known.

Jane, being a discreet soul, dared not hint at Renie's confidences, but her shrewd eyes never left the two, and the concern she observed in Jason Sherwood's face made her exultant. She saw here a fine chance for the homeless little girl who had crept about her heartstrings. She wished ardently that she could have a few more words with her—" give her a few pointers," she said, mentally, so that in case Mr. Jason spoke again—

But he *would* speak again. Of course he would! Imagine a man taking her in the first carriage with him—a man like that, if he didn't mean to show that he would ask her once more. And Renie would have to be wise. Mr. Jason was a fine-looking man. . . . Of course, he was old . . . But what of that? A fine, fresh-looking man . . . " Better than half the young whippersnappers that were going."

" Renie," she said to the girl that evening, " I heard Mr. Jason and Mr. Ventnor talking to-day."

Renie tried to appear interested.

" Mr. Jason seemed to think that Mis' Sherwood left you some of her money."

" I hope not," said Renie, indignantly. " What would I do with Mrs. Sherwood's money? "

" Well, Mr. Jason thought it likely. An' Mr. Ventnor, he said she left you nothing."

Renie shrugged her shoulders.

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"I hope you won't be a goose again, when Mr. Jason asks—"

Renie sat up straight.

"Jane, I like you," she said. "You're my good friend, and I'll do anything for you. But I won't marry Mr. Jason. That's all—I won't marry him."

"You're flying in the face of Providence," said Jane, wrathfully. When Renie Desmond looked like that she knew she meant it.

"I'm sorry," said Renie. "But I won't marry him."

And Jane had to be content.

The next day Matilda Todgins watched the new butcher get out of his wagon in front of the Sherwood villa, carefully hitch his horse, and then disappear in the direction of the kitchen. He met old Jane, who had been gathering late vegetables from the garden, and had her apron full of them.

The new butcher was very much embarrassed. He hemmed and hawed, condoled with Jane about "Mis' Sherwood's" sudden taking off, and made various remarks of more or less brilliancy.

"And Miss Renie," he said, at last. "Where is Miss Renie?"

"Inside somewheres," Jane said, tartly. "What do you want with her, Mr. Little?"

The young man stood upon his dignity at once—he did not like Jane's tone.

"That concerns Miss Renie and myself," he said. "I'd like to see her, if it's all the same to you."

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

"She's in the kitchen helping to get dinner. You can go in."

He availed himself of the permission at once, and Jane let him go alone. She knew what was coming—Matilda Todgins had not been idle, and the rumors had grown that Renie was to marry

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Joshua Little. "Never saw such luck," some of them said. Renie, looking up from her dish-washing, saw Mr. Little in the doorway. The song she was humming died on her lips.

"How d'ye do?" said Joshua Little, diffidently.

"Oh, I'm splendid," said Renie. "Sit down, won't you? I'll call Jane."

She made a move toward the door.

"I saw Jane," said the butcher. "An' I wanted to see you. So she told me I might come in."

"But *she* does all the buying," said Renie.

"I don't want you to buy anything," said the young man with a smile. "Say, Renie, I've been watching you off and on this last six months—ever since I came to Broadplains. I'm a rough and ready chap, I know, and not good enough for you. But I'm awfully fond of you, Renie, and the other girls aren't in it. I could have any amount of them if I wanted to, but I don't. I want you, Renie. Will you marry me?"

Renie's hands fell helpless, her eyes widened.

"Don't be a fool, Josh Little," she said.

"I'm no fool," he said, in a vexed tone. "I'm fair and square and you know me, Renie. Consider it. How long do you want? I'll come back to-night—"

He started for the door. Renie stirred impatiently.

"Come back!" she said. "I don't want you to come back to-night, or any other night, either. What do you want to marry me for?"

"Because I'm so fond of you, Renie. Ah, now"—he came over to her side and looked pleadingly at her—"ah, now, you know I'm fond of you. Why, I've been showing you that ever since I found it out myself—and that's three months ago. Do marry me, Renie.

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I'll be very good to you. You won't have to work so hard, and you can do as you please—"

Renie stamped her foot. There were tears of vexation in her eyes.

"Hush! Why do you come around here after me, when there are so many nice girls in Broadplains? There's Mattie Todgins, just as sweet as she can be—"

"A jealous, bad-tempered—"

"She is *not*. Don't *dare* to speak so of my friend."

"Renie—I didn't know she was a friend of yours! She said—"

"Don't care what she said. She's a good, nice girl, and she's pretty, too. And I won't have you asking me to marry you when I don't want you."

"But, Renie, what will you do?"

"You've got to stay here in Broadplains, haven't you?" she demanded.

"Yes," he admitted, reluctantly.

"Well, I haven't. I'm going out into the beautiful world that I've never seen. I'm going to have lovely clothes and go to operas and balls and parties. I'm going to be the very finest lady in the land. And I'm going to be free."

"Renie, you can't do all that without money."

"Oh, I shall earn money," confidently.

"How can you earn money and enjoy yourself, too?"

Renie, for the first time, looked troubled. Then she gripped her fingers about his arm and pulled him over to the little glass above the kitchen sink.

"See, there," she said.

He looked at both their faces reflected in the mirror. And he sighed.

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"We're—different," said Renie, with the wisdom learned from Jane a few days before. "Just different, that's all. And because we're different, I can't marry you. And because I don't care for you. I don't like nice looks in anybody—but if ever I marry it must be some one who knows more than I. Now, I don't know a vast deal," argued Renie, "but I know more than you do. And that ain't fair. So I won't marry you, Joshua Little. But I'm much obliged to you just the same, and let's be friends."

She gave him her hand with a charming smile. He held it in his own moist fingers, wishing he knew what to do with it, since the touch of it set his heart palpitating wildly. And yet he did not want to let it go.

"Forever, Miss Renie," he said, desperately. He began to shake her hand then. "Forever," he went on with fervor. "And I'll love you the same, always; and if you could think it over and change your mind, maybe you could teach me what you know some time—if you'd care to bother, Miss Renie. I'd be glad to learn—"

"You're a good butcher, Joshua—and one can't be good at *everything*," said Renie, severely. "You go get somebody better suited to you, that's a nice fellow, and I'll be glad. And I hope, if ever I come back to Broadplains, to find you very, very happy and comfortable."

"You will really leave, Miss Renie?"

"Oh, my, yes," said Renie. "Of course I will. Think I'd stay here? No, I'm going out into the world, Joshua. Maybe, sometime, I'll send you an invitation to visit me. And you must come."

"I certainly will, Miss Renie," said the young fellow, much bewildered, and not knowing any more than she—visionary child! —what she was driving at. "I certainly will. And no one wishes you more luck than I do."

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"Thank you," was her gracious response. And the butcher went away.

Mr. Jason Sherwood sent for Renie shortly afterward.

"I am returning to the city on the eight o'clock train," he said, with his most business-like air. "I can't stay here. Tell me—you have not reconsidered your decision of some days ago?"

Renie shook her head.

"No," she said. "You're very, very good to make it—it might be a great nuisance to a man like you if you had a wife like me. I think you're a very kind-hearted gentleman, and I shall always like you. And perhaps when I have seen all the beautiful things in the world I will go to your house and work for you. I should be glad to. That won't be for a long time yet, of course. It takes time to see things."

"I feel that I stand in the position of guardian to you," said Mr. Jason. "Let me send you to school—give you an education. I can place you with the same madames who are teaching my girl Ursula. You would get along with her very nicely."

"I daresay," said Renie. "But that isn't it. And see, I am quite fairly well-educated now."

Mr. Jason Sherwood stared.

"Why, you don't know the meaning of the word education," he said.

"But I do," persisted Renie.

"Have you ever been to school?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Sherwood never let me go. But I studied just the same."

"Tell me what you know."

"English," said Renie, promptly.

He laughed.

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"That's a good start. What else?"

"German."

"German?" he raised his eyebrows.

"A little Latin; mathematics; chemistry—and I can read French well, though I can't pronounce it, because my teacher didn't know much of that language and I had to learn it myself. But I've read—oh, lots of books in French. I wouldn't speak it—I'd be ashamed, not knowing how to twist my tongue—"

Mr. Jason fell helplessly into a chair.

"Look here," he said. "You've been the talk of this town for the past four years at least. Every one has said you were downtrodden, every one has wondered how you bore the misery Maria Sherwood inflicted on you; every one has pitied you and speculated as to when you would run away, or as to when some one would run away with you. Yet here you tell me—"

Renie came closer to him, her eyes shining.

"Mr. Jason," she said, "you've been kind to me, and I'll tell you. Five years ago, when I was going on fourteen, Mrs. Sherwood saw me buried in a story book—hardly understanding a word of it, for I had not been taught anything at all, I was so little when I came here. I was sitting under the back porch, and did not hear her coming until she stood over me. She tore the book from me—she raised her hand and beat me, beat me until I fairly shivered, for she couldn't make me cry!" And there was a defiant note in the young voice. "No, sir—she couldn't make *me* cry. Oh, how she did beat me! 'You shall be ignorant,' she said to me. 'Ignorant as a clown; you shall marry a clown, and you shall cast your lot with clowns forever—ignorant, the more ignorant the better. You shall know nothing—not even how to write your own name! You shall sink all that is finer in you into the brutish

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element of your hardworked existence. You shall work—work all your life long, and be ignorant as I can keep you.' "

Jason Sherwood looked at that brilliant face. He had never been so fascinated in his life. He was simply enthralled at the passion in her voice.

" How she hated you! " he said.

Renie laughed bitterly.

" Yes, she hated me. Oh, but when I ran along the roads on her errands, people stopped to look at me, and they said, ' Poor child, and she is such a lady! ' I heard them. I never said I heard this to any one. But I knew there was a difference between Mrs. Sherwood and—and a lady." She drew her breath sharply through her little teeth. " When Mrs. Sherwood brought me here I wore about my neck a little gold medal—and on it was a picture of a beautiful woman. This beautiful woman, I found out, is the same as they have on the banners at St. James' Church—it is our blessed Lady. I knew, because I had that about my neck, that I was a Catholic. So one night I stole into the priest's house. I said to him: ' Please tell me, what is a lady? '

" He laughed, I remember—because I got angry when he laughed. He saw that I was angry, though.

" 'A lady,' he said, ' is one who never loses her temper.'

" Then I was ashamed.

" 'A lady is modest and truthful, and gentle and loving; she does her duty; she bears suffering cheerfully; she does what she is told to do, and does it as best she can. She prays for every one, and for the whole world; she thanks God for her trials as well as her blessings.'

" That's what he said to me."

Renie looked at Jason Sherwood triumphantly.

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"Well, I knew I must be all that. So I did not run away from Mrs. Sherwood, and I did all these things with patience. 'You shall be ignorant, and shall marry a clown,' she had said to me."

"That is the part I'm interested in," said Jason Sherwood. Some new emotion was tugging at his heartstrings now.

"'Way out in the woods lived an old, old lady," said Renie, "who people said was mad. She wasn't, though. She was just queer. But, oh, she knew so much! She was very fond of singing—and I can sing, Mr. Jason. I can sing without a bit of trouble. One day I had been sent out to pick blackberries, and I was singing as I went along, and this old lady popped her head out at me from the bushes. She had been gathering herbs; had her basket full of them.

"'What a voice!' she said. 'Go on, child, go on.'

"I sang, and sang, and sang—until I didn't know any more—until I couldn't think of anything else. And then she sat alongside of me and asked me questions about myself—who I was, where I came from, who I was living with. I told her that Mrs. Sherwood said I should be a clown. I told her everything. I told her I was a Catholic, and I found out that she was one, too. But she did not go to church, she said. When I finished she looked at me.

"'You poor little thing,' she said. 'And I have so much useless knowledge—I wish I could give it to you.'

"I cried, then, because I wished she could, and it wasn't any use wishing. But she asked me to come back again.

"And by and by, when I was supposed to lie in bed—Mrs. Sherwood would send me to bed at half-past seven—I used to go out to the mad lady's and sing for her. And then she taught me everything I know."

"Where is she now?" asked Mr. Jason.

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"She's dead," said Renie. "She died a year ago. Her name was almost the same as yours, 'Sherewode.' She said they had never changed the spelling of their name—that she was of the original English Sherewodes of Lancashire."

But Mr. Jason wasn't listening.

"You're a great little girl, Renie."

"Yes, sir," admitted Renie. "I know I am."

"But you're a baby in worldly knowledge, just the same."

"No," said Renie, thoughtfully. "Madam told me never to know anything. It was the better way. Never know anything; show what you do know only when it makes the best impression; if you get a chance to do a thing that will help you, do it—and then keep your mouth closed. In that way you get the reputation of knowing three times as much as you do, actually."

"Well, great Scott!" said Mr. Jason. "That's a good creed."

"Of course it is," said Renie.

"Did madam tell you to believe everything people told you?" went on Mr. Jason, with a quizzical glance.

"No, sir," said Renie, promptly. "Only to act as if I did."

He threw back his head and laughed. He held out his hand.

"Shake with me, little girl—you're a brick!" he said. "And I'll bet any amount of money you'll get along, too. You will, if I can start you."

Renie laughed, too—but she shook hands seriously.

"I'm not a bit afraid," she said.

"No," he made answer. "You're too young to be afraid. Child, do you know you're very pretty?"

"Yes, sir. That's the reason you want to marry me, instead of Jane. And I guess that's the reason Joshua Little wants to marry me. But," she swung around to look at her face in the long

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pier-mirror, " my prettiness won't last."

" You can run away," said Mr. Jason, and there was a curious look in his face. " Run away now, Renie."

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CHAPTER IV.

"THE GREAT RENIE DESMOND."

LEFT alone, Mr. Jason sat pondering. His practical mind did not fully grasp Renie's queerness of character, but the mixture of shrewdness and utter ignorance she displayed was an absurd combination. Life seemed to have passed her by—life and love—for she understood neither. Nor had her trials taught her very much. They had been physical trials, and she had borne them for a purpose. Her emotions were still in abeyance. She did not feel emotions deeply—her chief impulse now being a desire to become acquainted with what was outside her own heretofore narrow existence.

Now, Mr. Jason Sherwood knew the conflict that awaited her. Training, here, had been conspicuous by its absence. The knowledge she spoke of—well, it depended upon its extent as far as value was concerned—its extent and its thoroughness. Half-knowledge is of no good to any one. He had learned that opposition made her stubborn. That the things she was forbidden to do she would try to do. How far was her moral sense developed? Far enough to help her avoid evil?

He felt that she did not know evil. What, then, would teach her to avoid it but that subtle distinction between right and wrong, which is the inheritance of every child of Adam? And Jason Sherwood, pondering still further, grew vexed at the dead woman who had allowed so beautiful a flower to grow in so untrained a fashion. Picturesque, she certainly was—but who

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could guarantee the future for her—the future that seemed to her so dazzling?

She had declared her Catholicism. What sort of a Catholic was she? She had not said she attended church, knew her pastor, or mentioned how far her religion was part of her life. Yes, a girl like Renie Desmond would need a deep, strong hold on spiritual things—a knowledge of good and evil—

And then he shrugged his shoulders. Why should he bother about her? Who was she, anyway? She had declined his offer to lift her, to secure her from want, to fix her position. Why should he bother? Renie Desmond had little to do with his future—nothing, in fact.

But still she tormented him. It seemed a pity to allow her to face the perils that she must, alone and unprotected. True, her fearlessness might carry her through: she was certainly unafraid. Yet it was the fearlessness of ignorance. Would it last when temptations came?

He shook hands with her gravely when he stood waiting for the carriage that was to take him to the station.

"My dear Renie," he said, "I wish you'd consider the matter of going to school with Ursula. You would surely like each other—she is a good-natured, jolly little girl. And afterward, when you graduated, you could come home with her. Think it over. You are your own mistress now, and no one can force you to do anything against your will—but I know, from larger experience, just what is best for you. The freedom you find so sweet is not so pleasant when there is no one to care what becomes of you."

Renie's eyes were moist.

"Thank you, Mr. Jason," she said.

"You'll think it over and write to me?"

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"Yes, sir."

"Take time to make up your mind. In the meanwhile I have given Jane sufficient money to keep the villa for a month—at least until you have decided what to do. Is there any one to whom you can go for advice—"

Renie shook her head.

"There isn't any one I can go to."

"Your pastor—"

"He would tell me to do as you want me to," said Renie, thoughtfully. "No, thank you, Mr. Jason. I'll make up my mind alone."

Yes, he felt that she would. He felt that Renie Desmond must attend the school of experience—that older, wiser heads could teach her nothing. He was not surprised, then, ten days later, to receive a letter from her. What Renie's phases of thought were during those ten days were interesting enough, but we shall not enter into them. She had made up her mind before Mr. Jason had left. She intended to keep her resolution. To keep her freedom. To get out and breathe a larger, busier, more energizing air than this small village afforded. And nothing she thought of during those ten days caused her to falter in her determination.

So she wrote to him. Her language was exquisite. In the choicest English she thanked him for his offer to her, for his kind advice, for his proffers of assistance. She could take nothing further from him. She did not wish to be indebted to any one. She would always remember him kindly, and she begged to remain, very sincerely and gratefully, Renie Desmond.

He shrugged his shoulders when he finished reading it. Then he made out a check for five thousand dollars and wrote back to her.

He was very sorry that she could not do as he wished her to.

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If, at any time within the next year, she reconsidered the matter, his offer would still hold good. Meanwhile, it pleased him to inform her that Maria Sherwood had bequeathed her five thousand dollars. It would take some time to settle the dead woman's affairs, and he knew that the money would be of more benefit to her now than later. So he had deposited that sum in one of the city banks, per enclosed, and she could do with it as she saw fit. After which he gave her some good advice concerning its disposal. Hoped she would call on him for any help he could give her, if she came to New York. A card to his club would be all-sufficient. He also enclosed some money for present expenses. There was nothing further, unless she chose to write again. And he remained, very truly, Jason Sherwood.

Now, Jane Weeks knew just as well as Jason Sherwood himself that Renie's mistress had never a thought of leaving Renie a penny. But she was wise in her generation.

"The old skinflint!" she said. "That's a nice thing to do, isn't it! Such a paltry, mean, miserable sum! If she gave you this house, now, with that money, it would have helped to keep you. But, no! She just did that to soothe her conscience, the mean—"

"Oh, Jane, she is dead," said Renie. "And I won't know what to do with so much money. Five thousand dollars! My, I'm rich, Jane."

Jane laughed.

"Indeed, you are. As rich as Mr. Jason himself, I daresay. Well, you begin to live on five thousand dollars, and you'll find out how rich you are. Renie Desmond, where are you going to? Let's have a stop to this nonsense, and tell me plain out what you're a-going to do."

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Renie sat looking at her for a few minutes.

"This money makes things look differently," she said. "I had intended to go to the city—I have the fifteen dollars Mr. Jason sent me last Christmas—and would try to get an engagement as a singer—"

"Good Lord!" said Jane Weeks. "You'd never thought of going on the stage?"

"Yes," said Renie.

"Why, that's an *awful* idea," said Jane. "Dreadful, for a girl like you. And you'd have to wait months, maybe, before any one would so much as look at you."

"No," said Renie. "I have a letter that would make room for me anywhere. A friend of mine gave it to me. She said I should use it whenever I made up my mind to leave here. And I intended to. But now this money— Jane, I don't know what to do. I'd like you to come with me—but not yet. I want to go away alone. I want to feel lost, away out there where the people are, dear Jane—not because I don't like you, but because I've never felt lost, or been in a big place. Now, Jane, I am certainly going away. After a while, when I get that I want to see you, will you come with me?"

"Where to?" asked practical Jane.

"I don't know," confessed Renie. "There are such nice houses there, somewhere. And I'm sure that I won't want to idle *all* my time—only at first. We'll keep house together, you and I—and I'll be very great, and everybody will be standing about on the corners to look at Renie Desmond and her friend, Jane Weeks, who will frown so at people—"

Renie jumped to her feet, and tragically imitated Jane's frown.

"God give you sense," said Jane. "For a crazier child I never

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heard talk in all my life. But go ahead. I haven't any control over you, nor no one else. You've got to find out things for yourself—and now that you've got this money I won't fret about you as much as I would. And I mean to stay in Broadplains, anyhow. I'll always be here, in case you want to come back or send for me."

The girl threw her arms impulsively about her friend's neck.

"That's a dear Jane," she said. "I knew you'd do as I wanted you to. And now I'll write to Mr. Jason and thank him. I don't know *how* to thank him, Jane, and I only can't help wishing that he had been sensible and married you, and then I wouldn't have had to bother at all, for you would have been rich, too."

"Sometimes I think you're a fool, Renie," said Jane, in an acrid voice. "Don't talk in such mad fashion—it galls me to hear you. Mr. Jason to look at the like of me! And God only knows what he saw in you, Renie."

"Indeed," said Renie, not at all put down, "I'm wondering, too. For he has daughters and a son, and what in the world could he see in me? It was just his kind-heartedness, maybe, that was all. I'm glad I said no. That would be a big price to pay for being kind-hearted."

She went off to write her letter—which task she acquitted herself of well, for the words of gratitude came easily. When Jason Sherwood read the lines they affected him strangely.

"Now, she is just as sweet and fine a little girl as she can be," he said. "Fearless little soul—I hope the world is good to her, and that her freedom does not prove a more galling bondage than the slavery she has known all her life."

* * * * *

Renie's preparations for departure were soon made. Her townsfolk, burning with curiosity, made strenuous efforts to dis-

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cover her future whereabouts and intentions, but the girl was reticent. So was Jane. According to Jane, what Broadplains didn't know wouldn't keep it awake nights worrying. So she did her best to avoid worrying Broadplains, having an acute regard for the public welfare. With the tears streaming down her wrinkled face she bade Renie farewell—almost begging of her to change her plans. This, of course, Renie would not do. She liked Jane well enough—but her liking was not sufficiently strong to alter her determination. Besides, now that realization was almost within her reach, her heart beat high. She felt that a new life would begin for her the moment she seated herself in the train.

It did.

She shook hands the last time with Jane, kissed her affectionately, even waved her handkerchief at her from one of the car-windows ere the engine started, shrieking and puffing, out of the station. In a second, it seemed to her, Broadplains had disappeared, and Renie was standing on the threshold of a new world, looking about her. She walked half way up the car, which was almost empty, and sat down opposite a young man reading a newspaper. Her small dressing-case she put beside her on the seat. He, glancing up, looked at the face under the simple white hat. Then he ostentatiously laid aside the newspaper, and reached over for her dressing-case.

"Permit me to place it in the rack for you," he said. His bow was elaborate, his accents studied.

Renie Desmond became aware, for the first time in her life, of the existence of train-racks. She glanced at the one above her head reflectively.

"No, thank you," she said. "When I want it there, I'll put it up myself."

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The young man flushed, and sat down again quickly. An old gentleman on the opposite side of the car, who had frowned when the fellow addressed her, smiled under his gray mustache.

"The racks are there for that purpose," said the young man, rather stiffly.

Renie looked at him. She saw a bold-looking, handsome fellow of about thirty years, with a heavy black mustache, and a pair of remarkably bright brown eyes. Renie's introspective gaze went over him from top to toe. She was wondering who he was and what he was, and if strangers "outside" usually addressed other strangers in this fashion. She had read very few novels, or she would have recognized the fact that this handsome fellow was bent on a flirtation; that the glance he gave her was positively "killing," and that he told himself he had never seen a prettier girl, by George!

Renie was not a mind-reader, and being "rural," she did not know this species. She kept on staring, and when she had made up her mind that she did not like the gentleman, she looked out of the window. He was nonplused by the steady scrutiny. But his kind are unquenchable.

"Will you have some of this paper?" he asked, laying a portion of it on her lap.

Renie, with elbow leaning on the sill and eyes turned outward, did not heed. He buried himself in the rest of the newspaper, twirling his mustache, and watching her with some curiosity, it must be confessed. He certainly could not embarrass her—she might have been a wooden image, for all the feeling she evinced.

The train-boy came through just then, and the handsome young man called to him, buying a box of chocolates. These, as soon as the boy had passed, he laid on top of the paper in the girl's lap.

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This time Renie awoke from her reverie. She glanced down and then up. Then she held both candy and paper out to him without a word. He took them—also without speaking. She did not appear angry—but her face was a study. After which the girl picked up her dressing-case, and looked about her for another seat. The old gentleman opposite leaned over.

"Sit on this side," he said, in courteous accents. "I shall see that you are not annoyed. And if you wish me to, I shall speak to the conductor—such actions on the part of a man who would wish to be called a gentleman, I daresay, are infamous."

"Thank you," said Renie. And she smiled, as she moved across the aisle. "It is not the custom, then, for strangers to act so?" She spoke in a low voice.

"You are not city-bred, I take it, or you would know that his annoyance is an insult," said the old gentleman. He was very angry, and his face was red. He seemed almost too angry, even, for the occasion.

"Oh, no," said Renie. "He could not insult me."

The old gentleman looked at her. He could well believe that she was above insult from such a boor. Her manner said as much, for Renie, who could be the *grande dame* at will, was the *grande dame* now. He wondered who she was. Where was she going? Would friends meet her? He longed to ask her, but her manner puzzled him, and her self-possessed air. He could not speak to her as he wished, not knowing how she would take it—especially after her experience. Yet he was an old man— He would risk it.

"Your friends will meet you at your destination?" he asked. "Pardon me, if I seem inquisitive—but I have a daughter of about your age, and I should not like to see her traveling unescorted."

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"I have no friends in the city," said Renie. "I should like to ask you a few questions, if you will permit me. I wish to remain there for a few days—maybe weeks, or months—I can't tell how long. I wish you could give me the name of a good stopping-place—a *very* nice place."

"You are alone?" asked the old gentleman, in surprise.

"Yes," said Renie, "I am alone—just at present."

The old gentleman brightened up.

"At present—oh, well! If you go to the Wendell—that is a very nice hotel, and quite reasonable. You probably don't know the city. Get a cab at the station and give the man the name of the hotel. He will take you there without further trouble."

"Thank you," said Renie. "I am very grateful to you."

"And if you have occasion to go out while you are there, as you will, of course," he continued, "and you have to ask questions, don't put them to any one but a policeman."

"Thank you," said Renie again, and she smiled. She was learning her first lesson in the "larger life." It was not a pleasant lesson—this lesson of distrust. Nevertheless, it did not frighten her. Renie's self-assurance was her strong point.

At the Grand Central Station, six hours later, she bade her kind old friend adieu. He left her with a few more cautioning words, and would have been glad to see her safely on her way to the hotel, had not Renie evinced so decided a preference to be left alone. She got into the crowd of people alighting from the train. The calls of porters, the shouting of the baggagemen, the cries of the cabmen, the rush and the hurry and the bustle delighted her. She did not feel in the least confused, but walked slowly on, gazing about her with bright eyes, eagerly interested. This was the life of the city—this. This was the heart of it—this conflict of noises.

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It was strange, but it set the blood in her veins dancing with the exultation that had come to her the day of Mrs. Sherwood's death. Instead of awing her or making her helpless, as it would an ordinary young woman, the sense of her paltriness, her nothingness in this great crowd of human beings filled her with joy. She had been so long used to the same faces; she had known every name within miles of her; she had known the family affairs of all with whom she came in contact. Here she knew no one, no one knew her.

This Renie Desmond was certainly a unique character.

As she stood under the white electric light, a pleased little smile on her lips, some one touched her arm.

"Can't I assist you now, my dear young lady?"

It was her handsome fellow-traveler, who stood with an unpleasantly familiar look on his face. Renie straightened her head.

"Yes," she said. "You can come with me to the steps over there, when I shall ask that gentleman in blue to take care of you for a little while."

Her handsome fellow-traveler lifted his hat and walked on. Without further mishap, Renie singled out a cabman, gave him the name of the hotel, Wendell, and for the second time in her life had a carriage-ride.

"Please drive slowly," she told the man. She was anxious to get a grasp on this great, beautiful world; this great, beautiful city, where the people were to stand on the corners after a while to see the great Renie Desmond. She leaned forward, with parted lips. It was still daylight, and Fifth Avenue stretched broad and long before her. The beautifully-groomed people, the general air of prosperity; the carriages flashing by her, in which sat men and

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women laughing and chatting, or leaning back with that air of indolent hauteur which is the art of expression to-day in our moneyed class. Renie sat back, too, and her own face took on some of that expression. She gazed down at her simple brown dress. She would find a good dressmaker—a city dressmaker. She would be like these people—handsome, and well-groomed, and haughty.

Yes, people *would* stand on the corners some day to see the great Renie Desmond go by!

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CHAPTER V.

RENIE'S NEW FRIEND.

To the average person, life in even one of the most fashionable hotels in a city has its drawbacks when one comes to it alone and unattended. Renie Desmond made her entrance there with the *sang froid* that might be expected of such a self-assured young person. And she signed a name in the hotel register that would have made Jason Sherwood open his eyes. "Regine Desmond Sherewode," she wrote, smiling to herself as she did so. She hesitated a little over the next entry—then, still with that queer smile, she gave her hailing place as "Broadplains, N. Y."

Maria Sherwood's little maid-of-all work received the very best at the clerk's disposal, and was so impressive in her manner, that he glanced at the register to discover which member of a distinguished family the roof of his hostelry covered. Those who approach the giant monster, worldly favor, with timidity, can expect but rough treatment. But to those who act toward it as if it did not exist, it comes crawling obsequiously. Renie had found this true so far, and was still further to find it so.

The next morning she went to the bank, discovering that in order to cash her check she would have to be identified. This rather puzzled her.

"But I am a stranger here," she said. "Can't you reach Mr. Sherwood himself? He is personally acquainted with me."

They would try to get Mr. Sherwood on the telephone—which they did, and after matters were satisfactorily arranged, he asked

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Miss Desmond to speak to him. Following an exchange of greetings, he told her that he was leaving New York the next Tuesday for London. Had she any questions to ask him; was there any information he could give her, etc. To which Renie replied very graciously indeed. There was nothing he could do for her, and she was getting along very well.

This being settled, and good-by spoken, Renie cashed her check, immediately depositing, in her own name, the amount it called for, lacking a thousand dollars. She felt more sure of her ground with the money in her purse. From the bank she paid her self-promised visit to the dressmaker's establishment, and thence to a milliner's.

Behold, a few days afterward, a subservient waiter placing a chair at a small table in the hotel dining-room for an aristocratic young woman in evening costume, who did not condescend, by even a glance of curiosity, to evince interest in her fellow-diners. Her gown was remarkable for its modesty and its good taste, but they forgot both in the brilliancy of the gypsy face above it. Well-bred as people strive to be, it was not without reason that they stared at the stranger, whose self-possession was as far removed from boldness as day from night.

"She has certainly the most perfect manners," said Mrs. Monroe, not knowing that Renie's alert eyes watched, with unceasing vigilance, the examples of table etiquette in evidence about her.

"And a beautiful face," said Mrs. McRae—a slender, delicate-looking woman, whose scarlet lips and bright eyes were far too red and too bright for her almost ghastly countenance. She had been watching Renie from the moment she entered the dining-room. "It is such a child-like, good face," she continued. "She reminds me of a little sister I had—one who is dead."

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Mrs. Monroe shrugged her shoulders.

"They cultivate that frank manner," she said. "Appearances are deceiving."

"I suppose so," said Mrs. McRae. "I never felt that I wanted to be sure before. Who is she?"

"Nobody knows," said Mrs. Monroe, "or can take the risk of knowing," she added, with a laugh.

Mrs. McRae seemed disturbed. The resemblance of the newcomer to one she dearly loved, and the association of that resemblance with the happiest time of a clouded existence, made her anxious to defend the unknown child-woman, who so gravely and so decorously went on with her meal, as if she were a princess in disguise, used to the stares and comments of a curious world. Once she smiled as the waiter replied to a question, and Mrs. McRae turned her head aside quickly, surprised to feel the tears in her eyes. It was such a frank, childish smile!

She was destined to become closer acquainted. Their rooms were on the same floor, and as Renie entered the elevator, she noticed, for the first time, the delicate, white-faced woman, who, as she moved along the corridor, staggered a little, pausing then as if to recover her balance. Renie stood still a moment in thought —then she advanced and held out her arm.

"If you are ill, madam," she said, "I shall be pleased to help you to your door."

"Thank you," said Mrs. McRae. "I had no right to exert myself so—I was warned against it. But one gets so tired of being alone—of not seeing any but the faces of servants."

She would not have said as much to any one else. Renie looked at her with that quick, illuminating smile.

"I should imagine so," she said. This was so harmless, so

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inoffensive-appearing a woman, and she was ill—she would not be able to intrude on her, even if she wanted to. So Renie felt that she could be kind here without endangering her one desire for seclusion and aloofness in the midst of many.

"I am so strong myself that I can feel sorry for those who have to suffer," she went on, gently. "It is not always the people who are in pain who have time to think of the ills of other folks. And God has been very good to me to give me perfect health."

Mrs. McRae smiled wanly.

"When I was your age I did not dream of thanking God for such a thing," she said. "I was too accustomed to it. But now—"

A spasm seemed to contract her features. Renie slipped her arm about her. She was trembling.

"I am very nervous," she said, gaspingly. "I shall be better immediately."

So Renie held her, and when the pain had partly passed off, she assisted her to her room.

"May I not try to help you in some way further?" she asked, impulsively, her sweet face earnest and tender. "You are really very ill—and I am sure I can do *something*—"

Mrs. McRae made a clutch at the proprieties, so had the fascination of Renie grown upon her.

"Why, we are such strangers," she said. "My name is McRae—my husband was Jordan McRae, of Philadelphia."

"Ah!" thought Renie. The "McRae, of Philadelphia," showed her that something was expected of her in return. And Renie Desmond was equal to any occasion.

"I am a Sherewode," she said. "Born a Desmond, and the adopted daughter of one of the old Sherewode family—English—from Lancashire." She spoke modestly—as if there was much

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more to tell of the " Sherewodes," but it was not her intention to relate it now. " I am a stranger in the city," she added, as an afterthought. "And alone for the time being—until I can settle some of my affairs. Meanwhile I am trying to enjoy myself in my own way."

Mrs. McRae was satisfied. Whatever the girl's credentials might be, she was used to the " best " people—that one knew immediately. She would be careful, of course—one could not be too careful. But this was such a child!

The next few days saw Renie Desmond's intimacy with Mrs. McRae grow with every hour. The delicate woman had to keep to her room, and Renie showed her the utmost kindness. She had a pleasing manner; she was utterly fearless, and what she lacked in knowledge of the *convenances* she made up by constant watchfulness. Being adaptive, she had placed herself in these surroundings deliberately, anxious to see what was called the " best " life, to become acquainted with the customs of the " best " people. She was learning as fast as one can learn in a hotel—and that is fast, indeed—and with the aid of an acute perception, allied to common sense, she was able to distinguish between the false and the true.

Renie calculated rapidly during the few weeks that she stayed at the Wendell. She had no decided plans. She had no wish to save or hoard or add to the legacy which she supposed Maria Sherwood had bequeathed her—one penny of which she would not retain for her real future. She did not consider that money as of any but immediate benefit—to help her to see as many beautiful things as possible, so that she might have the memory of them to dwell on when she settled down to her lifework. As to what that lifework was to be she had not yet made up her mind. She had the letter which she had mentioned to Jane—but a stage career

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held no attractions for her until she could determine what a stage career really meant. She wanted to have no illusions concerning it.

God had given the girl a surprising amount of practical common sense, and old Madam Sherewode, the one friend who had taken any practical interest in her, and who had given her her name to use or not as she pleased, had helped to develop it.

So, Mrs. McRae taking this great liking to her, they went everywhere together—to theaters and concerts and exhibitions. And all the time the girl was learning, learning. And when, as was her wont, Margaret McRae got tired of the city, and proposed leaving it, Renie acceded. She had no definite plans—she had not been South—she had never seen even Niagara. She was willing to go anywhere and to do anything. So she lived the life she had planned for herself for the next three or four months—enjoying herself in a sober, earnest fashion that was highly amusing to her new-found friend.

In August the older woman suggested a visit to one of the seashore resorts. Mrs. McRae, during their intercourse, had become well-assured of a certain fact—that the girl would make no advances. She kept to herself with a dignified reserve that no amount of friendliness could break through. She was always willing to withdraw; she was always unconcerned, as well satisfied at being left alone as being made much of. Mrs. McRae, lonely, rich, and sickly, eating out her heart in the solitude of a purposeless life, felt that this new interest helped to make her days more pleasant. Renie asked nothing—was willing to give of time and trouble, and could, indeed, soothe the woman's most nerve-racking pain. So that she grew, in those long months, to cling to her, and to care for her.

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She was assured of the girl's respectability—she had never questioned it from the first—and she was learning, even as Jason Sherwood had, the utter fearlessness of her soul; the unconsciousness of her personal attractions seemed very odd to Margaret McRae. After awhile she became accustomed to both.

So the friendship grew apace, and under the chaperonage of Mrs. McRae, Renie found her list of acquaintances growing. Her indifference was her greatest charm, and it was an indifference that admitted of no compromise.

"Let us go where there are people," said Renie, when they were deciding. "I have no choice, so long as there are very many people there."

"You child!" said Mrs. McRae, laughing. "You have no regard for people. Why, then, should you care?"

"They are so interesting," said Renie. "I could watch people forever. I think that is the only way to grow wise—study people, people, people."

"Oh!" said Mrs. McRae. "But people hide their emotions now, Renie. The features are no longer an index to the character."

Renie shrugged her shoulders.

"I do not know," she said, thoughtfully. "The eyes, for instance? And the curves of the mouth, and the expression? Character must give a certain amount of individuality—that's why each face is different, one from the other."

"And I think we are all very much alike," said Mrs. McRae, smiling.

"Oh, no," said Renie. "You don't mean that."

"There is so much sameness and tameness about us."

"Well? Think of each one's undeveloped possibilities."

Mrs. McRae bent over.

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"Renie," she said, "what are the undeveloped possibilities in my face?"

She spoke jestingly—but there was earnestness underneath the question. Renie, putting out her forefinger, touched her forehead—touched the lines in it; touched her eyes and her lips. And was silent.

"Well, Renie?"

"Your face," said the girl, in a hushed voice, "is the face of a woman who has been disappointed."

"Yes," said Mrs. McRae.

"Who has given love—and had to take it back again," said Renie. And she added, quaintly: "It is too much for one woman, the love she gives. She dare not keep it all. For when she does, it leaves her face—like yours."

"What sort of love have I given—and had to take back again?" asked the woman. "What sort of love was it, oh, wise Renie?"

"I do not know," said Renie. "I have never loved any one in my life."

The ring of pain in the closing words had warned her. Her answer came as a shock, taking the woman's attention from herself.

"Not your mother?" she gasped.

"I never knew her—I never knew my parents. I had little kindness shown me, and no affection. Even Madam Sherewode, who adopted me—really, indeed, because she pitied me, and not because of love for me, never caressed me. Remember, I am not complaining. I have not felt the lack of caresses. I was grateful to those who were good to me, but I knew that Renie Desmond would always have to love herself a great deal to make up for the loss of love outside herself."

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"Don't talk foolishly," said Mrs. McRae. "Dear child, when you love you will be just like other women."

"Yes," laughed Renie. "I expect to love just like other women—if I love. I shall love a clean man—one pure of heart, and I shall love him whether he be rich or poor, high or low, crippled, or handsome and straight as man may be."

"And when he grows tired of you?" questioned Mrs. McRae, cynically.

"I shall not love outside my own religion, and in the Catholic marriage we do not think of that," said Renie.

"You would make a religion of your love?" asked Mrs. McRae. "The very worst kind, Renie."

"No," said Renie, "for God will bless it—if it comes."

"God's blessing—that is necessary?"

"Without it I do not see how you can expect such a great gift," said Renie, "or keep it. It *must* be a great gift, I think, and teach great unselfishness, if people receive it rightly."

"The wisdom of nineteen," laughed Mrs. McRae. "Let us continue. What else do you see in my face?"

"That is the principal thing—but there is another."

"Another?"

"Yes. Are you afraid of—any one?"

Mrs. McRae looked at her in a peculiar manner.

"Why?"

"At times you are nervous; you listen; you turn as if you expected to see some one—some one whom you did not care for."

"Yes," said Mrs. McRae. "You are very wise this time, for your almost twenty years. I *am* afraid, Renie. And it is a fear that will kill me."

She volunteered no information. And Renie asked nothing.

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CHAPTER VI.

WHAT RENIE SAW.

MRS. MCRAE, being virtually her own mistress, had determined to take Renie Desmond altogether under her wing, and to that end assumed a certain air of dictatorship which the girl found very amusing—considering that it affected her so little. Regarding this part of her life as an episode merely, Mrs. McRae was but a shadow on the screen. She did not mean to take her attachment seriously—nor to take anything seriously until she must. She was enjoying herself—she was learning, and that was better than all. Her appearance and her manner were in her favor, and Mrs. McRae's social rank gave her the necessary qualifications to enter a certain circle, and to meet certain people. Renie Desmond sat down and calculated. Her money would keep her just twelve months at this rate—then farewell to this existence, which she had been longing all her years to know.

Here, at the very beginning of it, she did not regret its ending. Maria Sherwood had spoiled a lovable character, and until Renie Desmond's heart found her, she would not be true to the higher life of which she was capable. Only pain could teach her—and as pain is the lot of every single human being, it would come to Renie Desmond also—the purifying element.

So she went to the seashore with Mrs. McRae, and forthwith set up a fashion of her own that highly amused her new-found friend. Ere long Renie Desmond Sherewode had earned a reputation as a wit. The temptation to parry would-be " soft nothings "

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with equally skilled retorts was irresistible. And yet she was surrounded by a wall of ice. There was friendliness, gentleness, and humor—all these—but underneath it that quiet reserve which nothing would nor could penetrate.

"There is a young man coming here to-morrow evening who bears almost the same name as you do yourself," said Mrs. McRae, one Sunday afternoon. "Julian Sherwood, he is called."

"Yes?" asked Renie.

"He is from the Continent, where he completed a university course this spring," finished Mrs. McRae. "Polish up your German, Renie."

"Oh, no," said Renie, and she laughed. "I think I can make myself understood in English."

Mrs. McRae thought so, too. She thought Renie could do anything, and she had certainly taken her out of her own sorrowful self. She delighted in watching the girl. Her sparkling face was a source of pleasure, and her abundant animal spirits always at her friend's disposal, to amuse or to entertain. From being self-centered, almost hypochondriacal, she became absorbed in Renie now, and unconsciously the girl was becoming dearer and dearer to her every day. With this protective feeling also came the wish to see her married safely. It was always well for a nice girl like Renie to marry, and have a husband to take care of her. If she went back home, home being, as far as Mrs. McRae understood, somewhere in the rural portion of New York State—a wide latitude—she would marry in a narrower circle, a circle that would not do her justice.

So Mrs. McRae resolved that Renie must marry—a resolution easily made, but not so easily carried out.

Julian Sherwood arrived on Monday at the United States

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Hotel, and put in his appearance at dinner. There was a hop given afterward, and it was while looking on at the dancers that he first caught sight of Renie Desmond. Seeking out a friend, then, who was also a friend of Mrs. McRae's, he begged for an introduction. Which was just as Mrs. McRae had planned, having ascertained, to her own satisfaction, some days before, the young man's antecedents and prospects.

Renie was ready for any mischief when Mrs. McRae came toward her with the solemn and grave young man—as solemn and as grave as she expected any university graduate to be.

"It is like introducing two relatives," said Mrs. McRae. "Permit me, Renie. Miss Sherewode, Mr. Sherwood."

Renie bowed.

"I think I have the honor of knowing your father," she said, audaciously. "Mr. Jason Sherwood?"

Mrs. McRae looked startled—the young man hugely pleased.

"Is it possible?" he asked. "Now, that is strange—he never mentioned you."

Renie laughed.

"Oh, no," she said. "He did not know me well enough to mention me. Besides, it was almost purely a business acquaintance."

"Oh," said Julian Sherwood. "That was it. I have an advantage over him, then."

"I wonder!" said Renie. "If you prove yourself as pleasant a social acquaintance as your father is a genial business man, your family is highly favored."

He looked at her, suspicious of sarcasm. So did Mrs. McRae.

"At least I can but try," he said. "May I take the initiatory steps to prove myself so, by asking for the next dance?"

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"Isn't that an awful result of a foreign education?" thought Renie. But she held her card out. Mrs. McRae felt forced to leave her to her own devices. Unfortunately, she dared not warn the girl not to trifle here, nor tell her how eligible a young man this Julian Sherwood was. She would not like to risk making Renie angry, and she felt that the subject of love or marriage was antagonistic to her. She sank languidly into a seat on the cool porch, through the big window of which she could overlook the ballroom. Her eyes were riveted on Renie's face. After all, what a lovely face it was! Surely it could not be possible that so sweet a girl had not met some one who touched her heart. But she had said she had never loved—not even in the ordinary relations of human life. And she was so gay and unconcerned as to warrant belief in this assertion.

Mrs. McRae sighed.

"I'm afraid it isn't any use," she said. "I do not think Julian Sherwood can make Renie love him. And marriage without love would be out of the question for a girl like her."

"Your Mr. Sherwood is very entertaining," said Renie, as she was getting ready for bed.

"*My* Mr. Sherwood!" Mrs. McRae looked at her in quizzical surprise. "That is good, Renie."

"Well, I must distinguish between them in some way," said Renie. "His father is my Mr. Sherwood."

"I beg of you not to set up the young man's father in opposition to himself," said Mrs. McRae.

"He would do well to take pattern by him," declared Renie. "He hasn't that languid manner, at any rate. Mrs. McRae, did you hear him ask me for a dance to-night? And I'm so miserable a dancer! I said yes just to punish him."

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"Did he mind very much?" sympathetically. "I suppose you told him you were only learning our way, as you tell every one else, you little wretch."

"Oh, no," said the girl, serenely. "I told him he'd get used to *ours* shortly—that they dance differently in different parts of the country."

"Renie!"

"Yes. He looked puzzled, and said that he had just come from the other side, and that he hadn't noticed any difference. I told him that he probably had not met any good dancer—before."

Mrs. McRae began to laugh helplessly.

"Oh, Renie!"

"He's splendid," said Renie. "Lovely. You noticed, perhaps, that I went out with him four times? Well, I did. Just to get him accustomed to our style, I said. In reality, I was learning, and behold me now—a full-fledged artist. He can waltz like a masculine seraph, and I am going out rowing with him to-morrow, if you will come with me."

"I certainly shall," said Mrs. McRae. She was still smiling —and she smiled broadly long after she had bidden Renie good-night. She was wondering what the young man thought of her audacious protégée.

No matter what he thought, he presented a very nice appearance the next morning in his white flannels, as he waited for the two ladies on the hotel porch. He felt quite some elation in having succeeded in winning the young girl's promise to go out with him, having heard a little about her exclusiveness over-night. Julian Sherwood was a big, well-built, likable chap—an ordinary young fellow, with none too much brain power, and a keen desire to enjoy life in a pleasant, indolent sort of way. He felt he had

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earned enjoyment for a few years, having exerted himself a little to win his degree this past year. Renie Desmond was showing him how very pleasant an indolent life could be with a bright and charming companion. Not that he was in love with her, nor likely to be, he told himself—but she was decidedly out of the ordinary in so far as he was a judge of girls.

So he greeted her this morning as she did him—with a bright face and light heart. Mrs. McRae felt the smile of the night before twitching at her lips as she watched them. The world was surely a pleasant place to live in when two such charming, happy, care-free people as these lived in it! If only they could remain so!

She took her place in the bow of the boat, so that she could watch them both. She averred she could hear so much better when she saw their expressions. Julian Sherwood laughed.

"I hope the back of my head is expressive, then," he said. He was delighted at getting the chance to face Renie.

"I shall watch Renie," said Mrs. McRae.

"Are you such a true reflection of other people's expressions?" asked Julian Sherwood.

"I shall try to be—on the present pleasant occasion," said Renie. "For Mrs. McRae's sake. Now where shall we go? You are not acquainted with the river, are you?"

"I know it—perhaps not very well, but I am a pretty strong oar," he said, modestly. "You tell me where you want me to take you. I shall hear but to obey."

"Well, then, row straight across to the other shore, then hug it down for about a quarter of a mile—yes, about a quarter of a mile. They say there is a little cove in there which is delightful. To-day we shall explore it together. Are you agreeable, Mrs. McRae?"

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"Just as you please, Renie," said her friend.

Renie watched the white-flanneled young man admiringly as he sent the boat out into the stream with strong and steady strokes. She did not speak for quite a while—nor did Mrs. McRae. It seemed so perfect a moment that she would wish to keep it forever. The dancing water, the green line of shore for which they were bound, the sky above them, the beautiful air —and the two before her, beautiful also, in health and strength and fairness.

"You are certainly an excellent stroke," said Renie, after a while. "Do they teach that at the—university?"

"Yes—as well as—dancing." He paused between the words almost imperceptibly. Renie raised her eyebrows.

"Oh?" she questioned. "This looks more finished than—than the other."

"Won't you own up?" he asked. "Were you just 'making believe,' as the children say, last night?"

"At least," she retorted, dipping her hands in the cool water, "you cannot say that I did not do admirably well before the last dance."

"That was it! I imagine you were fooling with me the first two."

"Perhaps—I was," said Renie, solemnly. Mrs. McRae laughed.

"You see," said Renie, "you looked so nice and scholarly, so self-composed and altogether solemn, that I couldn't resist the temptation."

"I rather liked it," said Julian Sherwood.

"That's queer," said Renie, with the air of one making a great discovery. "So did I."

And then, feeling perhaps that she had done sufficient damage

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for one day, and on such short acquaintance, Renie relapsed once more into silence.

They reached the other shore—which they found to be beautifully wooded, with a clear white sandy beach, and then Julian Sherwood proceeded to "hug it," as Renie had graphically bidden him, looking for the cove. Suddenly Mrs. McRae, sitting half-way in the bow, uttered an exclamation.

"There's a queer object," she said. "What in the world can it be? It looks like a log—"

Julian Sherwood turned his head in the direction in which she pointed. Renie, also, bent forward, gazing at the shore. Her eyes took in an object that had floated in to land—and what she saw was indelibly impressed upon her memory. In a moment, however, with an air of indifference, she called to Mrs. McRae.

"Don't you think that would be a pretty place for a summer residence?" she asked, pointing back to the upper part of the little island. "Don't bother about old logs covered with seaweed—see here. Isn't that a pretty hill right up there? Think of it crowned with an old-fashioned dark gray stone house. Oh, my slipper!" She bent over to tie it.

"Row back!" she said, in a whisper. "Quickly, quickly. If she sees that, it will kill her. Oh, please row back."

He needed no second bidding. He, too, had seen that which dimness of vision prevented Mrs. McRae from making out clearly. He sent the boat around with a whirl, and bent to the oars this time as if he meant it.

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. McRae. "Where are you going? I thought you meant to look for that cove, Renie."

"Oh, it's too warm," said Renie. She had turned her face away. "I'd rather go back now—I feel as if the sun—"

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Her lips were trembling. Mrs. McRae looked at her with sudden anxiety.

"What is the matter, child?" she said, in alarm. "Renie, look at me—why, you are as pale—"

"Don't mind me," said Renie. "Just a little bit faint, I think. It is the sun—*don't* you think it is the sun, Mr. Sherwood?"

"It must be," he said—then added, fervently: "I wish I had not asked you this morning, Miss Sherewode. It seems like an inauspicious omen."

"Oh, no," said Renie. "Such things will happen." Her whole figure was shaking.

"You've been out on hotter days than this," said Mrs. McRae, in a troubled voice. "And it came so suddenly, too, dear? Are you sure you weren't ill before you left the house?"

"I'm not sure," said Renie, bravely. "Mr. Sherwood will think I am a very delicate young lady—but, indeed, I'm not. I shall go out some other time—perhaps this afternoon, if I am better."

"Thank you," he said, in a grave voice. He thought she was a very brave little girl, indeed. He reached the landing-place in an incredibly short space of time. Mrs. McRae caught Renie's hand as he helped her from the boat, and discovered, as well as he, that her fingers were cold as ice.

"Oh, my dear Renie!" she said, much perturbed.

"I am ever so much better," she said, reassuringly. "I am, really. Don't bother now. Please, dear Mrs. McRae, don't bother, or I shall feel like the silly little girl I am."

She turned to Julian Sherwood.

"Are you coming in?" she asked.

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"No," he said. "I have a fancy for a longer row. I shall go out again."

Renie's lips twitched.

"I—I suppose you must," she faltered. She turned to follow Mrs. McRae, who stood looking around at them in puzzled fashion. "Thank you—for—for being so prompt," she said. "I knew what it would have meant—if—"

"We'll talk of that later," he said. He waved his hand to the elder woman. "Good-by, for a little while."

"Good-by," she said. Then she looked at Renie's white face. "You seem like one who has had a great shock," she said. "There isn't really anything the matter, Renie, dear?"

"No," said Renie. "Believe me. I would tell you—who else is there to care for me here—to care whether I feel ill or well, save you?"

She spoke affectionately. The sense of relief that came over her when they reached land had been almost overwhelming.

Mrs. McRae smiled sorrowfully.

"I am glad to hear you say that, Renie," she said. "I had thought you did not care—very much—if at all."

"For you?" asked Renie.

"For me," said Mrs. McRae.

The girl hesitated.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" she asked, in a troubled voice. "I suddenly discovered—out there—that I *did* care for you. I had not found it out before. And it came as a great surprise to me."

"Thank you, Renie," said Margaret McRae. "Thank you, dear."

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CHAPTER VII.

WALTER MCRAE.

WHEN Mrs. McRae came down to dinner that evening, she found that there was a strong wave of excitement in the air. Some of the hotel guests, out rowing that morning, had found the body of a beautiful woman. It had been in the water but a few hours, presumably, and, worse than all, there was evidence of foul play, as her hands had been tied behind her, there was a big bruise on her left temple, and the print of fingers about her throat. All this Mrs. McRae heard without asking for particulars. She knew her own morbid sensitiveness in regard to anything bordering on the ghastly—therefore she avoided all such topics. An extremely nervous woman, and her illness the outcome of a severe nervous shock, as she had told Renie, the slightest happening or excitement of this sort was enough to render her ill for days.

Renie was not surprised to notice, then, that she was much agitated at the dinner-hour, imagining that she had connected their row with the unfortunate creature whose body was lying in one of the outhouses down at the shore, preparatory to an investigation. She tried to be as light-hearted and amusing as possible, but Mrs. McRae refused to respond to her overtures.

"I am very much annoyed, Renie," she said, at last. "And I can't tell what to do. I have received a letter which has greatly upset me."

"Oh!" said Renie. "When?"

"Just before dinner—the mail came as I got downstairs."

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She hesitated. "It is from—from my stepson—from Walter McRae."

"Your stepson?" Renie opened her eyes in surprise. "Your —stepson?"

"Yes," said Mrs. McRae, in an irritated voice. "And he is coming here—here, of all places. Renie, you do not know what an ordeal—"

She drew her silk shawl closer about her figure.

"You told me I was disappointed—and afraid," she said, with a mournful smile. "Well, I am. I'm afraid now, Renie—I am frightened now."

Renie looked at her in amazement—then she took her arm, giving it an affectionate squeeze.

"Why—*why* do you worry yourself so?" she asked. "Whatever ordeal it may be it is easily avoided. Let us go away from the place at once."

"You would come?"

"Immediately," said Renie, in an indifferent tone. "You are the only attraction."

"You're a rogue," said Mrs. McRae, but her eyes lit up with pleasure. "Nevertheless, I can not take advantage of the offer. I must stay, Renie."

They were walking up and down the porch in the gathering dusk. The sun had set, but there was still a beautiful, soft light, and the waters glittered like yellow gold. Renie pointed to them, as they stood in silence drinking in the utter beauty and peace of sky and sea and distant shore. Then the girl, remembering that morning, shivered—and laughed, then, to hide the shiver.

"Why must you stay, if you would rather not?" she asked. "Do not answer me unless you care to, dear Mrs. McRae. All this

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is lovely—but there are just as lovely spots somewhere else—if we care to look for them."

"My dear Renie," said Mrs. McRae, in a low voice, "I am a very lonely woman. Long ago—it seems so long ago now, I was a very happy woman. When I married Jordan McRae I thought that life held nothing further worth while to me." She smiled bitterly. "Well, it hasn't. He had been married before and had one child, a son; my husband was well-known, popular, especially among the women of our set, and many wondered why he married me. How old do you think I am, Renie?"

Renie looked at her reflectively.

"I had thought you to be about thirty-eight years old," she said.

"I am twenty-seven," said Mrs. McRae.

"Oh," said Renie, in astonishment.

"Yes, dear; I was nineteen when I married. I was only a girl—too young for such a man as Jordan McRae, nearly twenty-five years my senior. I loved him dearly. But he soon got tired of me. Yet he was indifferently kind for about five years—until the chains grew irksome. He saw some one that he liked better then. I am not of your religion, Renie, but I have strict notions regarding the marriage bond, and that my husband could be untrue to me was beyond my comprehension. He left me one day, kissed me affectionately—and I never saw him alive—after that."

Renie did not speak; she simply pressed the nervous fingers she held.

"I do not know if he had made up his mind to go off with some one else," said Mrs. McRae. "That he had all his preparations made, we discovered afterward. He met some woman and quarreled with her. He was found shot through the heart in the

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early hours of the next morning and carried home to me. But, Renie," and she began to quiver now, " the worst you are still to hear. He had been shot with a little pearl-handled toy that he had bought for me a year before—a thing I very seldom used, even practicing at a target, and which I had not seen for months. It was found lying near him."

Still Renie did not speak—but this time she slipped her arm about her.

" What dreadful creature first associated my name with the affair I have never found out," said Mrs. McRae. " Yet for a time I was under suspicion. They said I had followed my husband, and in a fit of jealousy murdered him. I, who was too much of a simpleton to know that there was any cause for jealousy! I was ill—oh, so long. When I was able to get about again I was the wreck you see me. I shall never be better—never until I die."

" But you were proven innocent," said Renie.

" I suppose I could call it that," said Mrs. McRae. " The suspicion died a natural death, save in one person's heart. Walter McRae believes that I had some knowledge—some guilty knowledge—of his father's death."

" That is impossible," said Renie. " How could any man think—"

" I do not know," said Mrs. McRae, wearily. " I only feel that he is searching me through and through with his keen eyes; that he is always on the alert; that he is suspicious of me. For that reason I dare not avoid him—I would not run away from him. I must bear his presence until he gives up hounding me."

Her breath came quickly now, and her whole figure was trembling with emotion.

" You are not friendless," said Renie, in a low tone. " Why

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do you not ask him outright? Why do you not settle the matter at once? Let him understand that you know just how he feels, and that you snap your fingers at him."

Margaret McRae shuddered.

"I could not do that," she said. "You do not understand the ways of men, Renie. I must be pleasant and gentle and laugh and talk—until he goes away again. And you won't be nice to him, will you, Renie? You can be so attractive when you choose."

Renie lifted her shoulders with her characteristic motion.

"I won't be attractive—if I can help it—for indeed I do not know when that happens. It must be when I make fun of people," she added, thoughtfully. "That is the only time you ever accuse me of being so."

"He will come here the day after to-morrow," said Margaret McRae. "And if you—"

"How much longer do you intend to look so absorbed in each other?" questioned a discontented voice at Renie's elbow. "I've been trying to catch your eye this last ten minutes. Now I feel that I must speak."

"And I have a letter to write," said Mrs. McRae. "So I shall trust Renie to you for a little while. I shall not be long."

"Do not," said Renie, affectionately. She turned to Julian Sherwood and held out her hand.

"You are just splendid," she said, as soon as Mrs. McRae was out of hearing. "And I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"You are very brave," he rejoined. "You have the makings of a soldier in you."

"It was you who found her—afterward?" Renie's lips began to tremble again.

"Yes," he made answer. "Poor soul. A beautiful girl, Miss

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Renie—very beautiful." He hesitated a moment. "I also did something for which I could be imprisoned, I think."

"Good gracious!" said Renie. "What—"

"Well, you told me how nervous she—Mrs. McRae—was." Renie nodded. "And I had heard all about her—before, although she has no suspicion of it. I know her stepson, Walter."

"You do?" asked Renie. "And you—like him, perhaps?"

"Very much," said Julian Sherwood. "I met him while abroad—and we became close friends. He loves her dearly. He told me that she has been shabbily treated, and that he likes to make it up to her whenever he gets the chance. He speaks in terms of the highest regard for her."

Renie looked puzzled.

"Are you sure," she asked, "are you sure it is her stepson?"

"He is my best friend—and I feel honored by the friendship," said Julian Sherwood, simply. "But to come back. There was a locket around the dead woman's neck—and when I opened it I found Walter McRae's picture in it. I was shocked, I can tell you," he went on. "I took it immediately—for Walter's sake, as well as his stepmother's, and shall ask him to clear up the mystery. Perhaps he knew the poor creature. He will probably be here in a few days—he wrote me he would come while I was here—"

"The day after to-morrow," said Renie. "He is coming then." She looked rather confused. What sort of muddle was this?

"I kept the locket because I feared it would create talk. The initial 'M' is stamped into the case, and besides that, I believe McRae himself is pretty well known about here. I shall give it to him, and let him do as he likes with it."

"He probably can explain it," said Renie, thoughtfully. "But if he can not?"

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Julian Sherwood smiled incredulously.

"Walter can explain it," he said. "Does Mrs. McRae know—what we avoided this morning?"

"No," said Renie. "She has heard that a body was found, but she never listens to anything like that, and she has not begun to associate our interrupted row with it. She can not see very distinctly—and she has no suspicion."

"She will probably never know it," said Sherwood. He was delighted at the confidential mood into which he had been able to entice the girl. He had not yet seen the "icy reserve" which he had been told to beware of. In fact, Renie was not thinking of the young man at all. He was merely incidental. She was engaged at that moment in trying to solve the puzzle of his description of Walter McRae. Such a seeming contradiction to that of her friend's. And Julian Sherwood, with the egotism of a self-satisfied and easy-going young man, took great pleasure in the thought that this altogether charming young lady was not altogether averse to his society.

* * * * *

Two days later Renie Desmond was seated beside Margaret McRae, driving to the station to welcome Margaret McRae's stepson.

Julian Sherwood, on the plea of old friendship, was permitted to accompany them. Mrs. McRae, in the nervous flutter that always preceded any happening that she anticipated, talked and laughed with an altogether unnatural gayety. Renie was just as unnaturally silent. She had accepted the invitation, acknowledging a certain curiosity to herself as she did so. She was anxious to meet Walter McRae, to judge of things as she saw them, and not as they were presented to her. What sort of a man he might be

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in appearance, she did not conjecture—that she was not even thinking of.

She sat in the carriage while Julian helped Mrs. McRae alight, and gave her his arm as she walked along the station. Renie watched him with approval—he was certainly very deferent and courteous, and for the first time since she had met him, she looked at him, seeing him. Then, as she gazed, she realized quickly that some one was looking at her. Her glance strayed beyond the two figures to another, evidently waiting. His eyes were on her face—grave, honest eyes.

Renie felt the color mounting to her forehead. Her startled sight took in his appearance quickly. Not too tall, well-built, strong; clean-shaven, brown-haired; features clean-cut and powerful; strength the keynote of the face.

And even as she looked at him, he raised his hat, and held out his hand in greeting to her friend Margaret, and, bending, kissed her cheek. He hailed Julian Sherwood with a smile. Then he turned back with them to the carriage, and Renie Desmond knew that she was being introduced to him. A silent, quiet Renie indeed was she on the way home—conscious of a regret that she had come, and a desire to be let alone. Mrs. McRae, feeling that she was restrained in the presence of a stranger, tried to make up for her unwonted reserve by chattering on every topic that came into her head. She did not seem to observe that every time Renie raised her eyes she had to turn them aside; that her stepson could not keep his gaze away.

Julian Sherwood noticed it with much vexation. He could not understand Walter, who had never looked at a woman twice in his life, he imagined, the opposite sex having no attractions for him. Nor had he seen enough of Renie to know that she no more

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minded being stared at than a flower minds the dew. That to her, the admiration of men came, not, indeed, as a right, but a thing to be ignored. She did ignore it—not counting very much on the attractions her beauty gave her. She was glad people liked her prettiness, but her ambition lay beyond this time of admiration. She took it while she lived the life to which it was a necessity. Afterward, when she settled down to usefulness, her beauty and the admiration it excited could go the way of all ephemeral things.

In her prosaic, workaday way and plannings, Renie was a philosopher.

She exulted in the freedom she was knowing; she was tasting it to its full; she was doing as she pleased, and enjoying every moment of it; studying the people she met on the way of this short year. Next year they would not know her. She would be nothing to them—and they would be nothing to her.

But now, encountering Walter McRae's earnest gaze, Renie Desmond felt that here was a face she would not forget—when the year was past.

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CHAPTER VIII.

A DECLARATION.

"AND you can't explain it, Walter?"

"No, Julian, I can not. Nor do I recognize the poor creature. I am utterly at a loss to discover where she may have gotten the picture or this locket."

"Would Mrs.—would your stepmother know?"

Walter McRae hesitated.

"I hate to ask her," he said, frankly. "I do, really. She is such a nervous, poor soul—and I am constantly afraid for her. The least thing excites her so."

"But you see, Walter," began Julian, dubiously, "I took it away to avoid unnecessary talk for Mrs. McRae's sake, principally, knowing all that you have told me. Now I am not sure as to the right or wrong of it. It might help to find out who threw her into the water. There was foul play, you know, and it seems rather queer of me to keep back a clue like this. I felt sure you would recognize her."

Walter shook his head.

"I do not, Julian. And I am very sorry you yielded to the impulse of taking it. If you bring it back now it will probably cause much useless talk." He paused. "I can endure that, being so perfectly unacquainted with her—but Margaret— I can't understand it, Julian. What in the world can be the explanation? A woman whom I have never seen in all my life found dead, with my picture about her throat."

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"Unless," said Julian, "that it was done as a blind. It may have been placed there with intent."

"I have only one enemy who could be malignant or foolish enough to do a thing like that," said Walter, slowly. "But I have not seen him recently. And where could he get my photograph? Never, to my knowledge, have I had one taken that size. Yet it is myself, isn't it, Julian? That is as sure as you're looking at me."

Julian dropped the little locket with its fine gold chain into his hand.

"You keep it," he said. "Perhaps Davis will show up, anxious to trace results, if he did it. He's somewhere in New York State, isn't he, Walter?"

"I believe he is," said Walter. "He will surely manage to cross my path here. By Jove, I wish I could catch him at some of his funny tricks, and I'd soon settle him. Do you know what I'll do?" He drew his breath sharply through his teeth. "I'll put a detective on this case now, give him the locket and an idea of Davis' whereabouts, and let him do the rest."

"Davis is a foxy fellow, Walter," said Julian. "You must be careful."

"I'll let you do all the arranging, if you will, Julian. And if you can manage an interview with the detective for me, do it as secretly as possible. I'd like to know why Davis haunts me like that—you would imagine that I had done him some grievous injury."

"Instead of merely giving him a handsome, up-to-date, and well-deserved thrashing."

"It was well-deserved," said Walter. "Say, he was certainly a scoundrel."

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"A fine type," said Julian. He looked away carelessly. "What do you think of Miss Desmond Sherewode?"

"Miss Desmond Sherewode?" Walter McRae, too, suddenly assumed an air of carelessness. "Oh, she's a pretty little thing."

"A—pretty—little—thing!" echoed Julian Sherwood. "We're friends, then, Walter?"

"We are, indeed," said Walter, warmly.

"Even if it turns out that the pretty—little—thing—"

"If you are in love with her," said Walter McRae, deliberately, "I shall leave the place to-night."

"In love with her?" said Julian Sherwood, slowly. "I—can't say I'm that, Walter. But I like her very much. She is bright and quaint and pretty, and she has nerve, too, as you can imagine from what I have told you. But as to being in love with her, I can not say."

Walter McRae laughed.

"Nor I, Julian. I think our friendship can outlast the attraction?"

Julian Sherwood held out his hand.

"I should hope so, Walter," he said, warmly. "What comes or goes, we are friends. It will take more than a girl to come between us."

And yet, for men whose feelings were so little concerned, Walter McRae and Julian Sherwood tried to see a great deal more of Renie Desmond than she was willing that they should. She remembered her promise to Margaret McRae, and the result was that Walter came in for a coldness of treatment which he did not deserve and little relished. Renie did not know how to evade a question—she had not learned. Something in Walter McRae's face and earnest gaze had disturbed her calm self-sufficiency. That

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she was self-sufficient, no one who has read of her thus far can doubt.

And yet her position was not an easy one for the next few weeks. Margaret McRae's nervousness made her highly irritable; she was constantly worrying and fretting over her stepson's opinions and thoughts concerning her. One night before dinner, Renie, going to her room, was surprised to find her pacing the floor in a very agony.

"Oh, Renie," she said, sobbingly, "is this not awful—is this not an awful thing? To think that I can not be left alone—that I must be constantly harassed and worried—"

"What is it?" asked Renie.

For answer Margaret held out her hand. It contained a slip of paper, on which was written these lines:

"MRS. MCRAE:—

"It may be of interest to you to hear that your stepson, Walter, has had an interview with a detective from a private agency in New York this week."

That was all. Renie looked at her friend questioningly.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

Mrs. McRae threw herself into a chair, and began tapping her fingers on a small table near her.

"It means that Walter still considers me guilty—and that he is doing his best to prove it."

"My dear, dear Mrs. McRae," said Renie, in a gentle voice, and going over to her she knelt down on the floor beside her, "let us look at the matter calmly. It is so absurd, when you are innocent and the thing is five years old, to worry about it now. No matter what he may think, there is nothing to be proven."

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"Renie," said Margaret McRae, "I have brooded over it so long that unless something is done I shall go crazy. Often, I wake up at night with that terrible fear—the fear of madness."

She clutched Renie's shoulders in a tight grip. Renie knelt, thinking deeply.

"Look here," she said. "Let me talk to him. Give me that paper. I shall ask him what it means, ask him to be an honest enemy if he is an enemy at all—which I very much doubt. Let me take him unawares. Let me show him that we know just what he is, and what he is trying to do. And then we will fight him together, you and I. I shall not desert you until you are entirely clear of all blame. Is that satisfactory?"

"My dear Renie—"

"If he is doing this thing in the dark, he is a coward," said Renie. "And I shall tell him so. Come, now, give me your permission to make your battle mine."

"Renie, dear, I am afraid—I do not know what will happen. I am afraid."

"And that is the worst thing to be. What is the use of getting yourself into such a nervous state? You will be ill; you will bring on an attack of sickness, and if you do that—" Renie bent forward and kissed her—"think how you will spoil all *my* pleasure. You see, I shall have to take care of you. *Do* let me have my way in this, dear friend."

"Will you wait—just wait an hour or so—"

"What for?" demanded Renie. "Why?"

She moved her hands nervously.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I dread to have you go—and yet it seems so practical—it seems so easy to settle it in that way—"

Renie jumped to her feet.

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"It is settled, then. Will you come with me?"

"I dare not," said Mrs. McRae, covering her face with her hands.

Renie looked down at her with much concern in her face—then she took up the slip of paper and left the room. The first one she met downstairs was Julian Sherwood.

"Have you seen Mr. McRae?" she asked.

"He is in the smoking-room—I have just left him."

"Will you ask him to come to me, please? I shall wait for him here."

Although rather puzzled, Julian Sherwood did as she bade him. In a moment Walter McRae came out to her.

"There is nothing the matter with Margaret?" he asked. He called his stepmother by her first name, for he was almost as old as she.

"No," answered Renie. "Only I would like to have a little chat with you. It is about—her."

"Oh," he said, instantly. "Let us go outside, then. There will be less chance of interruption."

"I met your stepmother in New York," said Renie, after a few moments of silence. "Her ill-health and her fragility appealed to me—I had not met any one as ill as she before, and perhaps the feeling that I could be of some assistance to her created a sort of interest at first." They were walking along the country road now that led inland away from the river which the big house overlooked. "I would like to tell you this so that you won't say that I am interfering where I have no right. I have Mrs. McRae's permission to talk to you."

Walter stood still, looking at the girl in surprise.

"Yes?" he asked. "But I do not understand. What can

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you have to say that Margaret—that Mrs. McRae herself would not say to me?"

"Do you recognize this?" asked Renie, putting the strip of paper in his hand. "And is this true?"

He read it, puzzled, turned it over and over—then glanced at Renie with troubled eyes.

"Where did it come from?" he asked.

"It was dropped in at Mrs. McRae's window."

"How could it affect her?" he asked, in wonder. "What difference would it make?"

"Is it true?" demanded Renie.

"Yes," said Walter McRae. "It is true. I did have an appointment with a detective this morning."

Renie pressed her lips together.

"But the matter concerns myself alone. A very unpleasant matter, too," he went on, "and one as inexplicable to myself as to the man who has undertaken to solve it. Why this scrawl was sent to Margaret, I do not know—"

"Probably to warn her," said Renie.

"But it is purely personal," he said.

"Oh, no," said Renie, and her voice was hard now. "You will admit that she has a slight interest in it, at least. Oh, Mr. McRae," she put her hand on his arm, and spoke rapidly, "you look like a manly man—an honest man. I can't plead for your stepmother, since I only know of her just what I have seen. I can't say she was an innocent woman, for that I do not know. Had you been in her place, perhaps, and had the provocation she had, you would not be so long-suffering. Let matters in the past be as they may, she will atone all her life long for loving a man who was not worthy of her. Is it kind to pretend friendship, to

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come under the garb of fair words and seek to entrap her? If you are really trying to do the thing she believes, why not tell her so, as an honest man would, and not leave her to fret her heart out in the dread of it?"

Walter McRae stood looking at Renie Desmond with wide-open eyes. He had heard tales of her eccentricities, and of her disregard of people's thoughts and sentiments. Every word she said to him seemed to prove that this eccentricity was a mild form of insanity. So he kept staring at her—and Renie, looking at him, grew angry at the steadiness of his gaze.

"She is waiting for an answer," she said, haughtily. "And at least you will know that she is aware of your intention toward her—"

"Miss Sherewode," said Walter McRae, "I am asking myself if I am awake—I am at sea. Are you insane? Or is this a dream, from which I shall wake and start up with a laugh for its utter absurdity?"

"You do not know—"

"I can not understand a single word you are saying. If this is a joke, drop it. If it is truth, tell me what you are driving at. I, to hound Margaret, one of the best women God ever made? A woman whose life is a living hell to-day because—because of—" He hesitated, and lowered his voice. "It hurts me to speak of family matters here. My father—"

Renie nodded.

"I know," she said. "She has told me. And she thinks that you have always suspected her of his murder. She thinks that you are trying to prove that she murdered him. That your one idea is vengeance on her, and that you come to see her simply with that intention in view—to entrap her. She lives in perfect horror of

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it. I laugh at her—telling her how silly it is that after a thing like that happening five years ago—"

"Miss Sherewode," said Walter McRae, in a peculiar voice, "you talk like a sensible being—sometimes; but reason seems to have taken second place now. Will you tell me in plain, unequivocal terms, what you are driving at?"

Much astonished, but compelled to it by his forceful manner, Renie related the story as Mrs. McRae had told it. And as she spoke, the conviction grew on her listener that she was really sane and sensible, and that what she told him was true in so far as she knew it. When she finished there was a look of great pain in his eyes.

"I am sorry," he said. "I shall shock you now. Can you stand it?"

Renie smiled a little.

"I think so," she said.

"You really like Mrs. McRae?"

"I do, indeed. I am sorry for her. She is suffering, and she is a good-hearted, gentle, affectionate woman. She has been as tender to me as if she knew me all her life. Indeed I do like her."

"Well," said Walter McRae, deliberately, "I can only draw one conclusion from the facts you have just related. Margaret is insane."

Renie stood still, and every bit of color left her face.

"Oh, no!"

"It is true. My father was not murdered. Everything happened as she related it—he did leave her—for some one else. But Providence interfered. He was taken with a severe illness on the train, and on being removed to a hospital at the first stopping-place, it was diagnosed as typhoid. He was sick for two months,

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during which Margaret's own life was despaired of because of the shock his flight had caused her. He died before she recovered. I, myself, broke the news to her first—perhaps that is the reason she associates me with her idea of the affair."

For one time in her young life Renie was nonplused.

"I do not know what to do," she said. "I shall not know what to say to her. She has emphasized this thing so to me, saying that she felt I was the only one to whom she could talk freely. She appeared perfectly rational. I think it will be as well if you see her first. Talk to her pleasantly—but insist on making her understand that you have no intention of ferreting out crime—oh, you will know what to say," she said, impulsively. "Tell me—many people are crazy on one subject, are they not?"

"Most of us," he said, smiling a little. "But, seriously, I am much worried over Margaret. She has suffered so much." He sighed. "I wish I could make it up to her. I thought I had her entire trust—and you must have noticed how very much I try to be with her—that I never lose an opportunity—"

"Yes," said Renie, thoughtfully, "I have noticed."

"I wonder how I can inspire confidence?" he asked, despairingly. "Because her poor, tired mind wanders on one topic, that is not to say she is not perfectly sane on others."

"You will have to go away," said Renie. "And you will have to keep away. That is the only remedy I can see."

Walter McRae stood looking at her; then his eyes kindled, and he shut his teeth hard.

"I won't go away," he said. "In the first place, owing to a miserable circumstance which has arisen I dare not go away, for my own sake. It would look like—well, cowardice or guilt."

Renie did not reply to this.

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"In the second place," he said, and this time he leaned forward and caught her hand, "I can not go. Not while you—Renie—"

He could say no more. Renie Desmond's heart gave a great bound.

"It was from that first moment," he went on. "On the station—you remember? You knew, too, didn't you? What was it you said to me—in that first glance—"

Renie raised her eyes to his, calmly, deliberately. She looked at him—at the strong, manly face, earnest and tender now. And then she released her hand.

"I told you the truth—then," she said. "You know what it was as well as I. I read the heart of a clean man, and I knew what love looked like. I am not sorry I know. I came out into this 'larger life' to learn experience." She laughed under her breath. "Let us go back."

"Back?" He, too, laughed. "Yes, when my little girl has promised me one thing—to marry me, because I love her and she loves me. Let us take care of Margaret together, Renie."

But Renie's face was hard as steel.

"I shall not marry you," she said. "Let us go back."

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CHAPTER IX.

SUSPICION.

LEFT to herself in her own room Margaret McRae paced up and down the floor, from window to door and back again, her excitement driving her. As the minutes wore away and Renie did not return, she could scarcely keep herself within bounds; she felt a great desire to scream. The girl seemed gone an age. Supposing Walter McRae convinced her of her guilt—supposing she should lose the only friend she had made and cared for—

And by and by this thought became fixed. She was wild to see Renie's face, feeling that the first sight of it would tell her the truth. And as she hesitated, with contracted brows and twitching lips, a tapping at the window-pane attracted her. She glanced toward it, shrinking back with a low cry of fear. For there she caught sight of a face pressed close against it.

The man waited until the first shock had passed. Then he beckoned, signifying that he had no intention of harming her—that he wished to speak to her. She approached him fearfully, her eyes dark with excitement. She was trembling from head to foot. She raised the window then.

"What is it?" she asked. She reached over and put her finger on the electric bell. "What do you want here? Tell me, or I shall ring for a servant and have you taken into custody."

"Wait," he said. "I wish to do you a favor. Your friend—that girl—I know her. She is in Walter McRae's employ. Be careful of her. You can see them now, if you care to go down that road there. Be careful. That's all. Just be careful."

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Mrs. McRae staggered back against the wall.

"Who are you?" she asked, faintly.

"A friend—if you will let me be one," he answered. "And Walter McRae's enemy—I have an old score to settle with him—and I shall pay it yet." He scowled. "I do not want him to know that I am here, until my plans are settled. Meanwhile, I shall watch them. Be very careful. Do not seem less friendly—but do not tell her any of your secrets. When I hear more I shall come again.

He disappeared—nor did Mrs. McRae try to follow him. She stood helplessly leaning against the wall for support, then her hands went to her forehead.

"I think I shall go crazy," she muttered, under her breath. "God help me!"

She tottered to a chair and sank into it. Renie in Walter's employ! Renie, whom she had trusted and grown to care for so! What dreadful thing was this? And yet it must be true. How constrained she was always in his presence—silent, speaking little, if at all, her eyes seldom meeting his! Ah, yes, it must be true! And so she sat, brooding, until the tired brain became steeped in its own suspicion.

"Margaret!" called her stepson's voice, at the door. "Margaret, are you in there?"

But she crouched lower in the chair. She could not bear to see him—not until she had composed herself a little. He turned the knob, but the door was locked, and he went away. She knew, then, that he would send Renie—and that Renie's room communicated with hers. Renie, whom she had trusted so! Renie, who had betrayed her! Renie, whom she had waited for! No, no, she must not see her now. So, moving swiftly toward the bed, she

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threw herself face downward on the pillows. In a few seconds she heard Renie enter her own room. She called to her, once or twice, hesitatingly—then, coming in, saw her, and imagined she was asleep.

"Poor soul, she is tired out, I suppose," she said to Walter McRae. "It is better not to disturb her." Mrs. McRae, listening at the door, heard the words, and her fingers clenched.

"But you, Renie—do not leave me so—you have not said—"

"I have said all I am going to," was Renie's answer. "Please do not enter on this subject again. I have nothing further to say."

The nails sunk into Mrs. McRae's palms.

"But that is foolishness," said the young man, in a vexed tone.

"Yes," said Renie, "I know it. Utter foolishness. That is why I will not allow you to commit yourself to it any further."

There was an inarticulate sound of disgust—evidently from McRae, and the shutting of a door—Renie's. Mrs. McRae went back to her recumbent posture.

* * * * *

And Renie went into her own room, and sitting down in one of the armchairs held communion with herself. She was face to face with reality.

How was Renie Desmond, hated and repressed all her young life, to know reality? Even the religion she professed with exacting scrupulosity, was not a living religion to her. Things outside herself touched her but faintly. She did right because she had right impulses, and because that God who keeps watch over orphaned little ones had guarded her with the tender love He has for all His children, and especially those of His who are helpless. Religion, love, liking, friendship, education—all these things were names to her, for her soul was sleeping. And now

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she felt that there was duty in the world—that there was seriousness. To what did she owe duty? She was alone; she owed it to herself—she must do her duty by herself.

And so she would. She roused up with a sigh. First, she would see in what manner she could benefit Mrs. McRae. Then she would drop quietly out of her life, go back to Jane, and devote herself to some good and noble work. She could find plenty of it to do—Renie was learning, every day, of what importance one enthusiastic soul can be to those around her.

She heard some one moving in the next room. She did not know how long she had been sitting pondering over her future, with serious face and thoughtful brow. The sound of the closing door told her that she was too late to talk with Margaret. She knew that Walter would be waiting for his stepmother, and she was just as glad that he would see her first. He could persuade her more easily than she.

So, as it was getting near the hour, she began to dress for dinner.

Meanwhile, Mrs. McRae accosted her stepson, who had kept vigil at the entrance in hopes of meeting her, with a charming smile.

"You are just the very one I wished to see," he said.

"Walter, I must tell you something that is worrying me greatly. Sit down here. We have time for a chat before dinner, and Renie is probably dressing."

Walter McRae smiled pleasantly, and placed the wide porch rocker for her.

"I have been waiting to see *you*," he said.

"Oh! Then you have noticed it also, perhaps."

He looked puzzled.

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"Don't you think," she said, dropping her voice, "that Miss Sherewode is—peculiar?"

"My dear Margaret!"

"I do, really, Walter—to put it mildly. She says the strangest things to me at times—and I am growing frightened. I do not know what to do."

"But she seems a perfectly sensible girl," said Walter. He was watching her keenly. He could detect no change in her manner; she was nervous, but that was her habitual state. He did not know much of insanity—but this was certainly a baffling case. What notion had put it into her head that Renie was mad—that was what she meant—unless the old fancy of insane people had come to her, and the friend who was dearest became the worst enemy?

"She *seems* to be," said Mrs. McRae. "Don't you think a person could be crazy without letting any one know it? I don't know what to make of her at times. This afternoon, for instance, she was very much excited. You haven't seen her this afternoon?"

"You did not send her to me to tell me anything this afternoon?"

"I?" queried Mrs. McRae. "Why, Walter, is there anything I could not tell you myself?"

"I thought that perhaps you might have done so," he went on steadily. "Margaret, I hate to bring up something that must be very painful to you—but you know that I am your best friend, don't you?"

"Indeed, yes," she responded.

"I would rather suffer anything than that you should suffer," he went on. "You have had to bear enough, Margaret, and I reverence you from the bottom of my heart. Don't harbor sus-

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picions of me—don't be unjust to me. I can't think who has tried to poison your mind against me. Wait—don't speak. I know that you received a line telling you that I had been interviewing a detective. That was true, Margaret—but it is a matter connected with Julian Sherwood, and it has happened since I came here. You believe me, Margaret?"

"Yes," she said.

He sighed. There was no change in her face, and he knew how cunning people with a mania such as hers was could be. Later, when Renie came down and advanced to her, affectionately, he drew back to watch their greeting. Renie turned to bandy a jest with Julian Sherwood, and as she did so, Margaret looked at her. Those eyes, their expression, solved all doubts for Walter McRae. Frightened him, too, for the girl he had grown to love.

There was, as usual, a dance that evening. Thanks to Julian Sherwood, Renie was now an excellent dancer. But Walter McRae's conversation was more serious than the amusement warranted.

"Are you a sound sleeper?" he asked.

"No," replied Renie. "I wake easily."

"I don't want to worry you—but be on your guard to-night."

"You think—"

"I don't know what to think. She seems very strange."

"I have noticed it. But I am not afraid—she could not harm me."

"Insane people have fourfold strength," he warned.

Renie smiled.

"Tell me, honestly," she said. "Do you think I can do her any good? Do you think that if I stay here and care for her that she will grow to hate me—or to like me more?"

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"I am afraid that she distrusts you now. You have to look out for yourself."

"Very well," said Renie. While he was speaking a sudden resolution came to her. "I shall leave."

Walter McRae fell back, hurt and astonished.

"Leave here?"

"Yes—in the morning."

"But—you will let me come—you will tell me—"

"No. I am going back home. I am not used to this life—I don't care for it. I have had a year of it and I am satisfied. I thought I could never get tired. I have seen many lovely things—a good many big cities and Niagara—one of the longings of my childish dreams. Now I shall go home."

"And I—"

"You have been—most kind." She looked up at him with smiling lips. "Very kind. But to me you are merely an episode. Forgive me."

"So!" he said. "That was the story your eyes told me on the station that first day?"

Renie felt the color in her cheeks. But she laughed evasively.

"You do not know who I am, nor where I come from," she said. "Perhaps, if you knew, you would hesitate before saying anything further to me. You must keep within your circle."

"Yes—and keep you within it," he said impetuously.

Renie shrugged her shoulders.

"That does not follow."

"You reckon without me in this thing," he said, determinedly. "If you think I shall give you up merely because you choose to say I must, you will soon find out your error."

"You are an honorable man," said Renie. "If I told you that

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I was here posing as one of these people, and am not one of them—that I do not care to be one of them—that I am a nobody —what would you say, then?"

"I need not look at you a second time to know that there is no guilt attached to you," said Walter McRae, sturdily. "Just as you are—just as I have learned to know you—I love you, and would take you. Nor am I risking anything by doing so. No woman could look like you and be untrue. You are truth itself, Renie. Is my profession of faith strong enough?"

Renie's eyes filled with tears.

"Nevertheless," she said, "I must still refuse the gift you proffer me. I am a Catholic—"

"And I."

"Yes?"

"Yes. All the McRaes are Catholic."

"But—your father."

"A good tree may bear bad fruit," said Walter McRae.

Renie was sorely perplexed. She did not know what to say now—her feet moved mechanically, her lids were downcast. They made the circle of the hall, and then he stopped, and led her out to the veranda. Mrs. McRae was seemingly wrapped in conversation with Julian Sherwood. In reality her eyes had followed them unceasingly.

"Will you give me some definite idea," he said, "before we get off the subject, Renie? I must know when I can have you to myself—not for a few minutes, surrounded by people in this fashion."

Renie drew back, startled.

"I have not promised to marry you," she said.

"But you will."

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His confident, easy manner alarmed her. If she had met stubborn people in her life, at least she had been able to oppose stubbornness with opposition. Now she felt all her resolution oozing away from her.

Fortunately or unfortunately, before she pledged herself to any given line of conduct, Julian Sherwood advanced to her side.

"I think you owe me one or two dances," he said. "And Mrs. McRae wants to speak to you, Walter."

Renie watched him go, almost with relief.

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CHAPTER X.

THAT NIGHT.

She turned to Julian Sherwood.

"There—the dance is starting," she said. "Come." Her eyes were shining and her face flushed. "Let us not miss a single bit of it. I have a fancy to dance this last waltz with you."

"Last waltz!" echoed Julian. "Why, Miss Sherewode, there will be a dozen others."

"No," said Renie; "not for me. This is the last I shall dance to-night. Come, Mr. Sherwood."

Her strange humor nonplused him—and the bright eyes and suddenly flushed cheeks stirred him strangely. She was always brilliant; but to-night she seemed to fairly sparkle—as if her face had been bathed in light. She danced, too, until the last strains had died into silence—an unusual thing for Renie.

"Let us get away from these people," he said, suddenly. "What a crush! Get a shawl or something, and come out with me. I have something to say to you."

"I'll see if I can find one," said Renie. "Stay with Mrs. McRae until I come."

She left him, going at once to her room. But instead of a shawl, she hurriedly rummaged through her closet until she came across her long dust-cloak. This she donned, and then made her way carefully down the stairs, gained the porch at the back of the house, and scudded across the grounds that divided the hotel from the river road.

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She was sure to meet people in the immediate vicinity if she went the regular way, but there was an unfrequented path by which she might come out again farther up—a path that led into the village. It was a walk of a mile to reach the place she sought. But over that Renie did not worry, being used to country roads—and country miles, for that matter.

The problem had become too much for her to face alone. She was going to ask help. Yes, she who had decided for herself all her life long, was going to throw herself now on the friendly counsel and stronger mind of the village priest.

She had made up her mind that one could depend on him. She had seen him come out upon the altar every Sunday since she had been here; and heard him preach, too, vigorously, steadily, in a way that pleased the girl, who liked strong opinions and strong ideals. She did not shrink from his probable condemnation. She would tell him her story. She would ask him what she should do. She would let him decide for her.

What Father Wells thought of the bareheaded young woman who came into his parlor, sat down at his solicitation, and looked at him so searchingly for a few moments before she opened her lips, would be hard to say. She was not ill; she was not nervous; she certainly did not look worried, or as if she were under any great strain of conscience. But she looked honest; her eyes were straightforward, and her manner candid. When she spoke he listened in silence.

And she told him everything with the frankness of a child. Told him her whole story; told him of her youth; of the education snatched, as it were, from the lips of a woman who had given her permission to use her name when or where she pleased; she told him of this woman's influence in theatrical circles; of the letter

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which she had given her, telling her that with her voice and appearance it would open doors otherwise hard to enter. She told him of her suddenly-acquired little fortune; of how she had spent and was spending it to realize her ambition; of Mrs. McRae; of Mrs. McRae's stepson. And then she asked him to help her decide.

He was very kind to her. Perhaps the hearing of such a strange story rather relieved the monotony which every country priests encounters at times in the life he knows. He listened, and when she finished he smiled at her.

"Tell me what you *want* to do?" he asked. "What are your intentions?"

Renie looked thoughtful.

"You are your own mistress," said the priest. "You have no one to restrain you. And you have been a very fortunate girl in not encountering trials that wait on the way of life for almost every girl. It may be that it is because you are so fearless—you do not seem afraid even now, facing an undecided future."

"No," said Renie. "I am afraid of nothing—and that is the truth. I am free. And freedom is very sweet." She smiled in a naïve fashion. "I love my freedom. It is delightful to go where I will—act as I please. That there is no one to bid me do this or that. You have no idea how delightful it is, Father. But I must also do right. Does my relation with this lady who has been my friend compel me to consider her?"

"Nothing but Christian charity compels that," said Father Wells. "If you can do her any good, I would stay with her. If she is really insane, you might, given time, be able to assist in the cure of her malady. But it is a risky thing to do. You have no affection for this young man?"

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"I can not say," said Renie. "Certainly, I am not indifferent. If it is the right kind of affection only time will prove."

"I would advise you to prove it, then," said Father Wells, somewhat tartly. "You've asked my advice. Now, you know that people mildly insane often become violently so. You have no right to endanger your life or health, since you have to render an account of both to your Creator. You have talents. Talent is good only in so far as it is put to the use God intended it. What is your talent doing for God?"

"Nothing," said Renie.

"Then you are burying it—and you will be held accountable," said Father Wells. "One must make the best of one's self. What has God given me that I may praise Him? To the flower its beauty and its odor; to the sea its changing color, its sublimity, its strength; to the sky the glory of the dawn, the loveliness of sunset. All these inanimate things show forth His grandeur. And we, the noblest of His creations, what are *we* doing for Him?"

Renie stared at him, drinking in his words.

"We must protect our lives; He gives them to us to safeguard in a reasonable manner. Why, think you, has He put melody in the throat of a great singer; color in the brain of a painter; poetry in the heart of a writer; skill in the hand of a sculptor? For nothing? For material uses? Shape yourself to God's wishes, my child. That is your vocation. And only God can help you. And only God can show you. Your duties will come to you—if you meet them but half way."

Renie stood up.

"I shall go back to-morrow," she said. "And I shall find Jane, and I will do what I can—just as you tell me to. Perhaps I have not known or chosen the right way yet. But I shall now."

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"You must ask Him," said the priest, gravely.

"Yes, Father." She turned to him. "Will you shake hands with me, please? It is not likely you will ever see me again."

He did as she asked him, very gravely, and Renie went out again as she had come. But there was a new purpose in her heart.

* * * * *

Meanwhile her absence from the hotel had been noticed and commented upon. It was after twelve o'clock when she returned —not as she had gone, for in going she had been afraid of remonstrance from either of the two young men who were her virtual shadows, or Mrs. McRae—and possibly of unwelcome company. Returning, she walked fearlessly up to the hotel porch, where Walter McRae stood, in great anxiety. His stepmother had retired an hour since, seemingly little disturbed by Renie's strange disappearance. His anxiety and annoyance had been so plainly visible that they doubled her suspicions, and she was correspondingly cold to his conjectures. Julian Sherwood, too, seemed not a whit less disturbed. Mrs. McRae, at Walter's earnest solicitations, entered Renie's rooms, but coming out quickly, announced that none of the girl's wraps were missing and that she must be about the house somewhere.

Therefore, when Renie came up the steps and the light from the parlors flared on her face, and on her damp rings of waving hair, Walter McRae started forward with an ejaculation.

"Where have you been?" he asked, in a savage undertone.

"To the village," said Renie. "Why?"

"To the village? And alone—along that road?"

"Why not?"

"You never went alone?"

"No—I had my thoughts for company."

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He ground his teeth.

"It is after twelve o'clock," he said.

"Is it, really? Then I must hurry off to bed. Where is Mrs. McRae?"

"Retired to her room an hour ago."

"You did not worry her about me, I hope?"

"No, no," he said, impatiently. "Renie, what made you do so foolhardy a thing?"

Renie shook her head.

"I am used to country roads and country darkness—and I am afraid of nothing. You know I am never afraid. How can the darkness hurt me? Yet you seem angry. Do not be angry. I was in serious doubt what to do—and I went to consult some one who I knew would not be inclined either to favor me or to hurt me."

"Will you not give me the right to ask you what your intentions are?"

"No," said Renie. "I can not give you any right. But I shall tell you what I mean to do. I am going away from here to-morrow. When I am home I shall write to you, and tell you all about myself. You need not answer—but whether you answer or not, I will not expect to see you—"

"Renie, I refuse—"

"Not for a while, anyhow. I shall tell you when. If I am worth while to you, I am worth waiting for. You must wait for me until I find out whether or not I am worth the waiting—"

"Of all the enigmatical creatures—"

"I understand that I must appear so," said Renie, calmly. "But I don't understand lovers, and perhaps I am cold-hearted. I can't understand you wanting me. I can't understand myself, or whether I want you or not. I'm going to find out."

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"Renie, no woman should be like that. Women are for us to love and care for. You are looking at your natural birthright as if it were an acquirement."

"I know you are a good man," said Renie. "Now I must know how I know it. I know that I saw something in your face—something that appealed to me. No one else's ever did that. You might as well go out there to that sea and try to carry it away spoonful by spoonful as to induce me to listen to you, to encourage you, when I do not know what I can give you in exchange. I shall not take anything for which I cannot make adequate return."

"You are an independent, self-sufficient little woman, Renie Sherewode," he said, in a vexed tone. "But I think I like it—in you."

"You must," said Renie, gravely. She gave him her hand. "I have danced with Mr. Sherwood, that is my farewell to him. But I would like you to shake hands with me. You have made me think. I shall lose nothing by knowing you. Will you say good-by to me?"

"Now?" he asked, in a troubled tone. "Renie—can't you reconsider? Think. I love you. I do love you. Is it fair not to permit me to teach you to care in return? And you are going out of my life—for all I know, forever. The pain that the thought gives me shows me how deeply I feel this thing."

"Thank you," said Renie. "You will not be sorry—if the feeling lasts, and if I think I can return it—no, you will not be sorry. It all depends upon you. Perhaps when I wish you to come—"

He caught the hand he held to his lips.

"How soon?" he breathed.

Renie shook her head—she would make no definite promise,

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and, wrenching her hand free, darted past him up the stairs. He stood gazing moodily after her, until Julian Sherwood came to him. Then, taking his arm, despite the growing lateness of the hour, he went out with him, and down along the sandy road.

There was a strange fluttering at Renie's heart as she sprang so hurriedly from Walter McRae's side. His earnestness had appealed to her; his persistency seemed to imply that his affection was not transitory. Yet she felt that she was, to a certain extent, masquerading under false pretences here. He must see her as she was, as she had been, humble, and the object of pity to those who had known her. How she had resented the pity of those villagers! She could look back upon it with compassion now. She had not understood. And yet she knew that had she responded to it then, or accepted it, she would have been sorry in the end. She could not accept any one's pity. No, nor would she accept Walter McRae's when he discovered her real state. So, for that reason, she would keep her independence still, so that when the day came she could look him proudly in the face, and say:

"Whether you give or keep your love, it can not affect me. No matter how harassed my life may have been, or what I have had to do, my pride has always been mine, and you do not stoop in taking me."

She was thinking this when she entered her own room—very softly that she might not disturb Mrs. McRae. The thought of her brought her mind back to the present. What would she do when she heard that Renie was about to leave her? For the first time a misgiving came to her. Margaret had depended so upon her—she had been so much to her—had really grown to care. And now—

Renie threw her coat across the bed. After all, Mrs. McRae

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was not a woman to care very long. A little while, maybe, and then she would pass out of her mind. Who was she that she should let the thought of her influence her future? She had learned a good deal of the woman's character. She was absorbed in her one great disappointment—in her one great fear. All other things were but as grass. No matter who came or went in her life, she could not twine the tendrils of affection about them very deeply. So it would not matter—no, it would not matter.

The door that led into her room was opened suddenly, just then. Renie turned from the mirror, her hair falling about her.

"I thought you were in bed," she said. "Did you hear me come in?"

Mrs. McRae stood staring at her. Her own hair was unbound and she was in négligée. The strange intensity of her gaze startled Renie. Yet she felt no fear. She went toward her.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Do you want me?"

"Yes," said Mrs. McRae. "I want to talk to you. What did Walter tell you?"

Renie breathed more freely. After all, she was perfectly rational, save on this one point. There was nothing to be perturbed about.

"He told me that you were very foolish to worry so uselessly," she said. "Didn't he say anything about it to you?"

"Yes," said Mrs. McRae, in a nervous, peculiar voice. She moved a few steps nearer to the girl. "Walter would be my friend—only for you. It is you who are my enemy."

Renie dared not take her eyes now from the other's face. She knew. With rapid calculation she gauged the distance between her and the door, and took a step backward. Margaret McRae's form suddenly grew rigid—she bent forward.

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"You—you are my enemy," she said. "And you are crazy. It is you who are crazy. I must put you where you will not hurt any one else with your lies and your wickedness. You stole him from me. It was you. I was sure that I would know you—know you in a thousand. And I have you here—in my power at last."

"I think you are talking great nonsense," said Renie. "Come, now, Mrs. McRae, you surely know me? Come back to bed—or come into my bed—"

Before she could finish, Margaret McRae dashed forward, and her fingers, working convulsively, were at Renie's throat. The girl, with an instinctive effort at self-protection, threw up one arm. The other hand, groping aimlessly along the wall for the bell, found it, but she had not strength to ring. She saw the distorted face above her, the froth at the lips that were drawn back over the teeth. She was snarling like an animal. And then the long fingers crushed into her throat. The lights danced about her, and darkness fell.

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CHAPTER XI.

A TRAGEDY.

HER first moments of returning consciousness seemed, to the girl, fraught with the horrors of a nightmare. Not until long hours afterward did Renie Desmond realize how close she had been to death. The Providence that shaped her life brought Walter McRae back again, almost in spite of himself—for he had meant to talk the whole thing over with Julian Sherwood, tell him of his affection for Renie, and ask him to be his friend. Careless, Julian Sherwood might indeed be—but staunch and true when it came to a matter involving or concerning those he liked. Walter McRae knew that he could trust him. Yet he could not go very far. The girl he loved was heavy upon his mind. The look in his stepmother's eyes on the porch that night lingered with him still, balefully.

"I must go back," he said, at last. "I hope I am acting foolishly—but I am afraid. I think Renie—Miss Sherewode—is in danger."

Julian, not having the key to this inexplicable remark, said nothing.

"I feel it," continued Walter, in tones of repressed excitement. "I feel it. We must return. Will you come back with me?"

"I certainly will," said Julian. "But—"

"You cannot understand," said Walter. "I shall tell you all later. At this moment I am too sure of her peril to take time to explain."

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He was walking rapidly toward the house, his friend following in perfect amazement. Just as rapidly he went inside.

"You have seen Mrs. McRae?" he asked one of the servants in the hall. He had forgotten the lateness of the hour, indeed, and the man stared at him.

"It is one o'clock, sir," he said. "I have not seen any of the ladies."

Walter tapped at his stepmother's door. He had not thought what excuse he would make if Mrs. McRae opened it. But she did not. Trying it, then, the young man found it open, and entered, pulling the reluctant Sherwood with him. And then, looking through into the apartment adjoining, they saw a sight that made their blood run cold. There was no mistaking the expression on the woman's face; her two hands were clasped about the girl's throat, her teeth showed; her lips were drawn back, and she was snarling.

"Renie!" shouted Walter, darting forward. Sherwood was not an instant behind him. It took their united strength to tear away those clinging hands, and she turned on both and fought them like a tigress. The noise soon attracted the attention of the other inmates of the big hotel. In a few minutes both rooms were filled with guests and servants. When Mrs. McRae, exhausted and worn out by the struggle, fell panting into a chair, with Julian Sherwood standing over her, Walter bent his attention to the recumbent form of the girl. Her face had been purple—and was still dusky in hue from the terrible pressure of those long, thin fingers.

"Call a doctor," was his imperative order. The doctor was already there, coming into the room. For the next hour they worked on the unconscious girl. To quiet Mrs. McRae the

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physician administered morphine, which sent her to sleep immediately, so that she was safe for the time being.

More than once the physician shook his head over Renie. But she was not to die. Walter McRae, who could not be prevailed upon to leave until positive that she would regain consciousness, fell on his knees and buried his face in his hands, when he first saw her eyes flare open. To Renie that waking moment was horrible. Her temples were throbbing, her lips were thick, her mouth parched, and it was impossible, almost, for her to move her head. The physician drew himself up with satisfaction.

"We'll do now, I guess," he said.

It was a long night for every one save the cause of the excitement, and she slept on, quietly, dreamlessly. To Renie, unused to physical pain, it seemed endless. Gradually, she realized what had happened, and her resolution to get away at once was strengthened a hundredfold.

Morning found her feverish and weak; morning, when it came, found Mrs. McRae with her mind a blank so far as her deed of the night before was concerned. She seemed perfectly rational and, in fact, her insane fit had passed for the nonce, leaving her the gentle, timid woman who had so won upon Renie's sympathies and affection. No one dared to tell her the cause of the girl's illness. When she came into the room and saw her lying there, weak and exhausted, she bent over her in genuine distress.

"My poor little girl, you are ill?" she said. "Why did not some one call me? Why did you not tell me, Renie?"

The maid, who had drawn back at her approach, looked at Renie. A quick glance of comprehension passed between them.

'You were so fast asleep," said Renie, in a slow, tired voice, "I did not want to wake you. I am all right now."

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Mrs. McRae put soft, slight fingers on her forehead. A shudder went over the girl at the touch.

"There! You have a chill!" said the poor woman in anxiety. "And your forehead is burning! You are in a high fever. Is there a doctor in the place?" she asked, turning to the maid.

"Yes, madam. He has already prescribed—see, here is his medicine."

Mrs. McRae looked much hurt.

"You had a doctor! And no one told me!" The tears were standing in her eyes. And suddenly the drops began to flow from under Renie's lids. She was so weak that she could not control them. The pity of it touched her heart, and, as in a flash, she had seen this poor soul, all the years she had to live, a dreaded being, watched and guarded like an animal. She knew that it must come to that—that, though perfectly sane at certain moments the wild fit would return, and then—

Mrs. McRae wrung her hands.

"Don't cry, Renie—forgive me, dear. You would have called me, I know. Forgive me." She was on her knees beside the bed, kissing her. "Dear little Renie, my one little friend, do not let me distress you."

"She has been very ill," said the maid, in a soft voice. She saw how this scene was trying the girl's nerves. "Please be careful."

"Oh, yes; oh, yes," said Mrs. McRae. "I may stay with her?" she pleaded then. "Ah, do let me stay with her."

"If the doctor permits it—he will be here in a half-hour and I shall ask him. But you must not excite her."

Renie lay with closed eyes after the unfortunate woman had left the room. The maid bent over her.

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"She does not remember a blessed thing," she said.

"No," whispered Renie. "Will you—" she raised herself painfully on one elbow—"help me to dress?"

"You can not dress, miss—you are too weak."

"I must. Help me. Get me into some sort of clothes. I must get up."

Protesting a little, the girl obeyed, Renie making her take the precaution to close the doors that led into Mrs. McRae's apartments. She found that she was even weaker than she had anticipated—but she could not stay in bed, considering all she had made up her mind to do. Her first act was to write a note to Walter:

"I have been told that you were the means of saving my life last night. Thank you—thank you a thousand times; not for that alone, but for your gentleness and kindness toward me. Mrs. McRae has been to see me—she is perfectly rational and much distressed at my apparent and unaccountable illness. Will you, if you care for me as you say, try to carry out one wish of mine? If possible, secure for her some good, kind attendant—one who will help her and be tender toward her. Do not send her to an asylum. If I dared—if I were strong enough—I would undertake this task. But I know she suspects me of trying to injure her, and doubtless her suspicions will return. I might not be so lucky a second time.

"I am going away. I had meant to be gone by this. I shall not say that you will hear no more of me—I can not tell. Perhaps when you do hear more you will not care for me. At any rate, try to remember me kindly."

She read it over; she would have liked to have used stronger words, but she dared not. So, signing it simply "Renie," she

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sealed and addressed it, and placed it on her dressing-table. She found, as she moved about, that her strength returned, and she resolved that as soon as night fell she would escape. Sending the maid downstairs, she gathered what few belongings she would need into a small hand-bag. By that time it was well on in the afternoon. She would wait until the dinner-gong rang; she was pretty sure, then, of being able to get away unperceived.

As she sat at the window, staring out for the last time at the scene below her; watching the brilliantly-dressed people moving to and fro; looking over the distant sea and thinking many thoughts, the sound of a footstep on the narrow porch that ran outside her window and that of Mrs. McRae—the whole front of the house, in fact—fell on her ear. It was an uncommon thing for any one to get out here, and so Renie knew. Almost instinctively she drew back, hiding herself at the intersection where the side wall and front wall of the room joined. She knew curiosity must be rife about her, and she had no desire to be observed just then. She was greatly surprised to see a man steal past her window, and stop at Mrs. McRae's. She bent forward.

Almost immediately she recognized the face, for Renie's memory was a long one, and the face too striking in its bold handsomeness to be soon forgotten.

It was the man who had annoyed her in the train the morning she left Broadplains!

What was he doing? Why was he here? What had he to do with Mrs. McRae? She waited. She could hear no word; but she knew that the window had been raised, and that he was talking with some one within. There was no one but Mrs. McRae in the room. Still she waited. Watched him steal back as he had come —but not before something had changed hands—she recognized

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the delicate, fragile fingers as Margaret took a small white package from him.

Renie, looking and straining her ears in vain, was thoroughly confounded. A sudden thought struck her then. She went over, and softly twisted the key in the lock of the door. Hardly had she done so, when fingers from the other side turned it. It resisted their effort. Once more, very softly. Then the woman shook it again and again with violence, and Renie could hear her muttering and calling—always on Walter and on herself—the two names intermingled. The girl was horror-stricken. How could it be that they, knowing her malady, could leave her alone? Could neglect to set a guard over her? Who knew what harm she might inflict on herself and on others?

The idea of coming out into the hall and reaching her intended victim that way did not seem to strike the poor creature. After a while she gave up trying to force an entrance, and Renie heard her pacing up and down the room. Then all became quiet. When Renie's maid came back she spoke to her sharply.

"Why was no one left with Mrs. McRae? Where is Mr. Walter?"

"He had to go to the station—he has sent for some doctor in the city—and he wanted to meet him himself; he stayed with her most of the day, miss. Took her out driving this morning. She was as gentle and reasonable—she does not know—"

"Of course not," said Renie. "But she has been very bad; shook my door again and again. There has been no one near her in over an hour, I am sure."

"Mr. McRae left some one with her—it was Susie, I think," said the girl. "Shall I ask?"

"Do. Find out if Susie is in there." The girl hesitated.

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" You had better not venture in alone, even though she does seem quiet now. Call some one."

The girl did so, cautioning the man not to show himself, unless he saw that Mrs. McRae was likely to attack her. But when she entered, everything was quiet, and Mrs. McRae lay upon her bed, apparently fast asleep, for she did not turn around to see who the intruder might be. As the girl stole softly out again, she met Susie face to face.

" Why did you leave her? " she asked. " She has been bad again."

The girl seemed much taken back.

" I was called downstairs—some one wanted to see me," she said. "And when I got there I found no one had sent for me. On the way back I met Nellie—"

" Mr. McRae won't like it if he finds out," said the other. " She is asleep now, though, so it doesn't matter."

Walter McRae, accompanied by a clever-looking gentleman, came into his stepmother's room a half-hour later with a question.

" How is she? " he asked, as the maid put her finger to her lips.

" Asleep, sir. She has been asleep an hour and over."

" It will be as well, then, if you have something to eat first, doctor," said Walter. " She falls into these deep sleeps—they last for hours. Then, in the evening, you can pretend that your visit is merely one of courtesy."

" That will be much better," said the physician. " You will, in the meantime, be able to give me a few further particulars of her hallucination."

He went down to dinner with the young man. At the tables, of course, there was nothing talked of but the terrible occurrence of the night before, and Walter McRae, with the physician and

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Julian Sherwood, were the covert scrutiny of all eyes. They bore it as well as they could, and after dinner went outside to smoke. The porch was deserted, for they had finished early, and the grounds had a lonely look. The physician laughed.

"In the midst of a crowd we find the desert," he said. "Strange —with over one hundred and fifty people in that dining-room there's not a soul out here."

"People can't see much beauty in nature when they're hungry," said Walter.

"There is one person abroad," went on the physician, pointing to a figure rapidly disappearing along the road. "At least we have seen one inhabitant of the wilds."

Walter smiled a little out of courtesy. He could not make conversation with this man; the one object of his coming weighed him down. Would he think Margaret curable? Would he be able to cure her? Supposing she had to be confined in an asylum—

But she had been so gentle that afternoon. So worried about Renie's unaccountable illness; so distressed at her inability to help her, with tears in her eyes when she mentioned her name. Oh, surely, if he and Renie took her away to some place where her mind might be distracted— He and Renie! Renie cared for her. Would she not consent now to marry him, that they might do what they could for the poor, afflicted soul?

To Walter McRae, his stepmother was a duty. He had not forgotten—he could not forget—that it was his father's ill-doing that had unsettled the brain of the woman who had loved him so passionately. She had been jealous even of the son in the old days, he remembered; and he also remembered how his heart had ached for her the day he told her of that father's death. No inkling came to him that her mind was not well-balanced. Although,

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since that, he had considered her strange at times, Renie's story had been the first clear knowledge of it.

He remembered her as she had been—a truly beautiful young woman, perfect in health, exuberantly happy. What was she now? Delicate, suffering, insane. Through his father's fault! He clinched his hands. The sins of the father are visited upon the son! It was written so. Had he not tried to atone? Had he not tried to make up the past to her, in so far as lay in his power? With the result that she dreaded him, feared him, suspected him. With the result that his very presence had brought on the attack of madness that had put the life of the girl he loved in jeopardy.

"Some evil fortune follows me," he said, half aloud. "Nothing I seem to do or try to do turns out happily. I cause only heartache and suffering—to myself and to others. It is my father's sin."

The physician was looking at him keenly, though he did not catch the muttered words.

"You feel this thing very much," he said. "Stepmothers are not often so highly appreciated."

"I know it," said Walter. "But she is different. There are reasons that I should bend before her and let her walk on me," he added bitterly. "She is a martyr."

"But you are not to blame," said the physician. "It is not right to worry over things for which we are not accountable, and which we can not help."

"But which, with God's assistance we can alleviate," said the young man. "I am not any too much in love with my stepmother, Dr. Roche. But I esteem her highly. I esteem any woman who suffers as she does and as she must. And now—now that this last blow has fallen—well, my esteem seems to merge into an unavailing regret."

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"It may not be so bad," said Dr. Roche. The feeling in the young man's voice touched him. "Let us call on her now—and settle matters in so far as we are able to."

"As you will." He turned on his heel and led the way, passing the people who were sauntering out from the big dining-room, speaking to no one. His contracted brow, his thoughtful face, his bent head, all denoted the mental strain he was enduring.

"She has not wakened, sir," said Susie, "nor even moved."

"I'll call her—she will want some dinner," said Walter. He approached the recumbent figure. Margaret McRae lay on her right side, one arm extended, the other lying across her breast. Her eyes were closed.

Speaking her name softly, her stepson bent over her. She did not answer him. He took her hand—it was like ice, and its coldness chilled him. He reeled backward, then, with an inarticulate exclamation:

"God!" he cried. "God in heaven, Margaret is dead!"

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CHAPTER XII.

A BIRD OF PASSAGE.

It was even so. Dr. Roche's hurried examination told the truth too plainly. She had been dead for at least two hours, he declared. It was another unpleasant occurrence to add to the list of the past few weeks—ghastly happenings would become associated with the name of the resort. The finding of the body of the young girl, and the evident fact that the poor creature had been foully done to death; the attempted murder of one of the guests, and the suicide of another—surely this was enough to cast gloom over any place.

And then, on top of that, came the astonishing discovery that Miss Desmond Sherewode was nowhere to be found.

The wildest rumors began to circulate. It was said that the young girl had disposed of Mrs. McRae—and even while many "pooh-poohed" the idea, it began to gain currency. She had evidently planned her flight. Her outside dress, her coat and hat, and a few of her personal belongings were missing. The note she had left on her dresser was brought to the now almost distracted Walter McRae. He scarcely read it—it had no effect on him—this last event had been too stupefying.

And then, suddenly, opinion seemed gradually to change. Renie's name was not mentioned so often. It was known now that Mrs. McRae died by poison, whether self-administered or not, no one knew. Not yet. It was murmured, then, that Walter McRae knew more of the matter than he should. Some one of the guests

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remembered hearing Mrs. McRae speak of the fear and dread she had for her stepson.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Renie Desmond carried out her plan without encountering even the faintest shadow of opposition, and by the time that Mrs. McRae's body was found, was far on the way to her destination. Her plan was to reach New York City, draw what money remained to her of the supposed legacy left her by Maria Sherwood, and then, going back to Broadplains, take up her abode in the house which her old and only friend, Madam Sherewode, had left her. She had no doubt but that Jane would willingly accompany her thither. The words of the priest had found firm lodgment in her mind. She could do some things well. She would go to her own pastor—in her mind, matured now by the larger life, the life she had longed for in the world, Broadplains was always home—she would throw herself heart and soul into church work; she would gather the children of the parish and teach them; she would give lessons in German and in mathematics and in singing to those of Broadplains and surrounding villages who could afford to pay for them. There were enough to support her, humbly, at least, in the beginning, and more would come. She would not ask to do great things—but just those that lay at hand—the little things. Yes, she thought in her own mind, and after a year or so, when she felt that she was good and worthy, she would let Walter know, she would tell him everything. Whatever came to her hand to do, she would do.

And then her thoughts went back to the day she left the little town; of the hour that was to come, when crowds would stand on the corners to see the " great Renie Desmond " go by. She smiled at that now. It would come, if she cared to have it so, she told

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herself with the assurance that was the main trait of her character. But she did not want it. Only peace and quiet and homely duties.

And afterward—ah, that afterward!—when she was worthy, when she had earned the right to it, love.

The cars drew up at a wayside station, and she learned that there would be a stop of fifteen minutes here. The engine was to take water, and a through train was to pass them. Renie, tired of sitting still, wandered out on to the platform, and from there down on to the path, gathering the flowers that grew beside it. She turned to go back again, with a handful of blossoms, when she saw an old man coming toward her. His form was drooping, his gray head bent upon his chest, his whole appearance that of one laboring under great distress of mind. His evident suffering atttracted the girl first; she noticed his hands, clasping and unclasping as he walked.

Her sympathetic gaze fastened upon him. He looked puzzled for a moment as he met it. Renie herself fell back.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. And then, "How *queer!*"

He continued to stare at her in that puzzled way. She advanced and held out her hand.

"You do not remember me, of course," she said. "But you once did me a great favor—how great I did not realize then."

"Your face is very familiar," he replied, and taking at the same time the hand she gave him, "but I can not—"

"It was a year ago. I was going to New York. A man on the train tried to annoy me, and you were kind enough to give me your protection—"

"Ah, I recollect now." He looked at her with his sad eyes, smiling a little. "You have fared well since?"

"Very well," she answered. "How is it with you?"

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"Very ill," he said.

"I am sorry," said Renie; adding, with an unwonted shyness: "You do not seem a man who deserves unhappiness."

"God knows," he answered. "I will not sadden your young heart by telling you of it."

She looked at her watch.

"I have ten minutes," she said. "You do not know how interested I am. You were so kind; you were so gentle, and to a perfect stranger! We dropped out of each other's lives after a few hours' acquaintance—and a year later we see each other again. Is it not queer?"

"Very queer," he assented. "Very queer." But his heart was not in the words. "My dear child," he went on, "my dear, dear child—"

He could go no further. Sobs choked him.

"You are in trouble," said Renie, gently. "Can I help you? Is it not strange that I should meet you here to-day? Take it as God's will that I should help you."

"Shortly after I met you I lost—my eldest girl," he said. "And now my darling, my youngest and the only one left to me, is dying."

Renie did not say a word, but her lips trembled. He saw it, and the tears in his eyes welled over.

"She has been ill a long, long time," he said. "A baffling fever. There is no hope; they can do nothing. I have tried so many things."

"A fever?" Renie's eyes questioned him. "Just the fever?"

"Only that—nothing can check it, nothing can break it. She is fading away."

Renie put her hand within his arm.

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"I am going back with you," she said, decisively. "I want to see your daughter."

"Of what use, dear child? No one can do her good now. It is too late."

"I do not think so," said Renie. "Listen. I knew an old, old lady once, whose greatest hobby was the gathering of herbs; she had, in fact, made a study of them. She was a good friend—and she imparted as much knowledge as she possessed to me. Let me see your girl now."

He stood staring at her.

"Your train— You will—"

She glanced at her watch once more.

"My train will start in two minutes. Wait. I shall return and get my bag—I had completely forgotten it. And then I shall see if God will make me the humble instrument to do her good. Try me," said Renie.

She left him, running with fleet steps along the station. The old man did not know what to think at this strange meeting. As for Renie, there was no gainsaying the feeling that had come to her. Hers was an impulsive life; she was swayed by every thought that came uppermost. She had not been trained to consider matters a second time Nor would she. Some feeling, some instinct she could not define, prompted her to take this step. Perhaps, she thought, this was the beginning. God wanted her to start her humble work here.

The old man stood looking after her with those saddened eyes. The train had started—he could not see her, and when he thought that probably, in that brief interval, the girl had changed her mind, the sickening wave of disappointment that swept over him showed him how high his hopes had arisen with faintest hope held out.

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And then he saw her again—she was looking at him with a smile on her lips as she walked toward him, a small bag in her hand, and allowed him to take it from her.

"Your friends!" he said, then, protestingly. "May I not send them word that you are detained—a telegram—"

"No," she said. "I have no friends."

"That is the truth?"

"It is positive truth—I have no friends. I am as free as air. I am responsible to no one; I have no ties, no kindred. I can do as I please."

"It seems strange that a girl so young, and—permit me to say it—so tender-hearted, should have to make an assertion like that."

Renie shrugged her shoulders.

"I am glad to do what I can find to do," said Renie. "But I am not tender-hearted. Rather, I am indifferent. You see," she went on, "one must be taught tenderness when one is little, like everything else. No one ever bothered with me. Maybe, my heart will wake up sometime—"

She realized that she was talking in the old strain—the strain that she had meant to leave behind her forever with the life it belonged to. And just as she realized this she thought of Walter McRae. The words died on her lips; a flush mounted her cheeks.

"Well," she said, with the frankness that was her chief characteristic, "maybe my heart is awake, and I shall find it out. I am not sure."

"You would be sure if it were so," said the old gentleman. He hardly listened to her. He was vexed at himself for his momentary hopefulness. How was it that the girl's winsomeness so worked upon him that he never questioned her power to do as she professed?

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"We will go to the house first—it lies upon this road," he said, "and you shall see my girl—my Lorna. If she is alive," he added, with a sigh.

"Pray God she may be," said Renie, quickening her steps. "I only ask you to believe that I know what I am going to do. Madam Sherewode studied this so long—it was while pursuing this fad of hers that I met her. In all the village and for miles around there was not a single case of fever which she did not cure. Afterwards, she let me help her. I have known that she has spent night after night with poor, sick people, tending them, and bathing them, and curing them, too, with her herbs and simples when all else failed. One time there was a girl—quite a young girl—the daughter of one of the magistrates. He had often laughed at Madam Sherewode, and it was he who had fastened on her the title of 'The Witch,' by which all the countryside began to call her. Well, his daughter did take ill—a low fever was prevalent then. He brought in all the doctors; they could not cure her. She lay at the point of death. Some one suggested sending for Madam Sherewode, and she came. The girl got well. And that happened very many times," said Renie.

"But this case may be a different one altogether," said the old man—there was a more hopeful ring in his voice, however. "Although, so far, drugs have proven powerless."

"We will try," said Renie, gently.

"I have tried everything," he said. "All doctors; have even brought one from the city." He hesitated. "She fretted herself into it. Her sister left us a year ago. She ran away from us to marry a man—a man," his voice trembled, "whom none but a foolish girl like her would trust. God knows where she is, or what has become of her."

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He lapsed into silence; Renie could not express her sympathy, but he took it for granted.

"It is that which has worried my Lorna. I was bitter at first. I had told Helen that Davis was a scoundrel. She would not listen to me. When I discovered her flight I said some bitter, some cruel things. Lorna, poor child, fretted day and night, and I was too much worn with grieving myself to notice. Then came the beginning of this. She has been ill very near seven months. Unless you can cure her, little girl, it is all over. Unless you can cure her," he mused. "How strange to think that you should come across my path when all looked so dark and black! Surely, it is a good omen."

"I shall do my very best to make it so," said Renie. She did not speak again until they had entered the rambling old country house, and the gentleman led the way upstairs. A buxom woman, with a kindly red face, came out of one of the rooms.

"How is Lorna, Mary?" asked the father, anxiously.

"Not a bit of change, Mr. Vernon," said the woman. She glanced at Renie, quickly. "The young lady gave me quite a start. I thought—"

"Would to God it were," said Mr. Vernon, in a broken voice, answering her unspoken sentence. "Would to God it were."

Renie stood at the bedside, looking down at the girl who, unless she could prevent it, would die. A thin form, emaciated to a painful degree; the white face, with the flush upon the cheeks; the blue veins prominent on the temples. Yet even as she gazed Renie was conscious of a resemblance to some one she had seen or known before. The girl's waxen lids were closed; long lashes swept her cheeks. Renie put her cool fingers on the transparent forehead. Instantly, at the touch, the eyes flared open, staring at

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her. Then a peaceful expression stole across the young girl's face.

"Helen!" she murmured, trying to raise her arms. "My Helen!"

"Yes, dear," said Renie, humoring her.

"Oh!" she panted, "you have been so long away. Do not go again—do not go again."

"Never, never, while you need me," said Renie. She dropped on her knees and put the other arm tenderly about the frail form. Then she kissed her—on the forehead and lips and eyes—as if she were indeed the loving sister who had left her, and who had returned.

The peace of the tired face was good to see; her hot fingers tightened on Renie's hand, and holding them thus, with a smile on her lips, she fell into a gentle sleep. Renie did not stir. With a warning gesture to the father she knelt until the soft breathing assured her that the sleep was indeed genuine. Then she disentangled her fingers, one by one, and rose. Mr. Vernon stood looking at her as she advanced to his side. They stole softly from the room.

"God bless you!" he murmured. "If only for that much, God bless you! He will, because He has sent you."

"I hope so," said Renie, in her brief, practical manner. "There is no time to be lost. I must have the tea infused before sunset. She needs it. Come; I want a basket and a broad knife, and your assistance."

So they set forth, the strange pair, and they returned again with a basket of "worthless weeds." And from them Renie prepared the draught on which so much depended. Nor did Madam Sherewode's recipe fail. For the first few days there was little

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change noticeable, but at the end of the third, Mary, entering, found the girl asleep—she had slept a great deal since Renie's coming—with soft drops of perspiration on her forehead. It was the sign for which all had been waiting. The woman could scarcely restrain herself as she crept out to her master and to the girl who was praying with all the fervor of her nature that God would be merciful. The tears streaming down the woman's face were tears of joy—and for a moment the three clasped hands in silent ecstasy, Renie's heart thrilling in union with the joy that filled them both—as if she, too, were allied to them by more than a chance sympathy. Then nothing would do but that Mr. Vernon must steal in to see the phenomenon himself. And after that Renie. But she, to the wonderment of the two watching her from the hall, did not immediately come out again. Instead she knelt and bowed her head in prayer and thanked God that He had made her His humble instrument. Mr. Vernon saw this action with an expression on his face that spoke volumes. He, too, went then to pour out his grateful heart to the Creator and Preserver of mankind.

Altogether, though they knew the battle before them was a hard one, they were very grateful that night—those three. The girl's life still trembled in the balance. There were months of weary convalescence to look forward to. But it would be convalescence, thought the happy father, with tears in his eyes.

And Lorna Vernon slept that long night through; and when she awoke that morning, she looked about her with eyes that recognized the old, familiar things surrounding her. Renie was at her bedside—but she drew back that her first glance might rest upon her father's face. She put out her hand to him, smiling weakly.

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"Dear father," she said. "My own dear father!"

"You are better?" he asked.

"I—think so." A wistful expression crossed her face. "Has Helen come? I dreamed that Helen came to see me. That she has been with me all the time."

"Helen has sent me," said Renie, bending forward, so that the girl could see her. "Helen could not come. But she knew I would take care of you."

"She is well?" the girl asked.

"Very well—very happy—save that she is worrying about her sister. You will try to get better quickly, so that you can visit her?"

"Oh, that is good," said the sick girl, with a long sigh of content. "That is so good to hear."

She turned her face away once more, and after that Renie did not leave her. She was all that a loving, tender sister could be, and more, during the weeks that followed.

"I have often wondered what shape my lifework will take," she said. "Perhaps I am to care for sick people. I think I am beginning to love Lorna."

"You make me happy," said the father. "You make me very, very happy."

"She is getting better every day," said Renie. "Soon she will be able to come downstairs."

"And then?"

"And then she will be able to walk a little way—"

"And you will leave us?"

"Not while you need me," said Renie, quickly. "Not while you or she find me even necessary."

"I think you are an angel in disguise, my dear."

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"I am glad a mistake is not punishable by law," was her rejoinder. He laughed. Then continued, with some anxiety:

"You do intend to leave us, then? You have made up your mind to go away?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes. This is not my home. I am not at rest here. I can't tell you why, but I know that as soon as I find my real home I shall know the real me."

"The real you! What a strange expression!"

"I know it is. I am but a bird of passage—but some time I shall discover the home nest." She smiled. "Don't trouble yourself with unpleasant thoughts. I shall be here very much longer, since you are kind enough to let me stay. And when I go, I shall manage it so that Lorna will not miss me very much."

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CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER A YEAR.

SHE kept her word. For one year Renie Desmond was an inmate of the Vernon home. Dropped to them from the skies, as it were, she stayed with them a brief space, and she made them happy. Lorna Vernon had learned, long since, of the kind deception practiced upon her as she lay so dangerously ill, and that Renie knew nothing of Helen or her whereabouts. Renie discouraged much dwelling on the past. At first, she let her talk just as she pleased, gradually weaning her away from the topic. Then, as she grew stronger, she resumed it—talking always in a hopeful strain. After a while Helen would surely return; her husband had been a great traveler; who knew in what strange part of the world they were now?

Renie had heard nothing of ulterior events. Not a word came to her from the "larger life" she had coveted, and which she had found so unsatisfying. It was to come back to her again in a strange way.

"It seems queer," said Lorna Vernon, one bright spring day, as they stood together on the steps, "that a girl like you—so very sweet and gentle and so pretty, should not have lovers by the score. I am sure that you must have a romance. See the visitors we have here, and how many are attracted by you. But you never look at them. Why is it, Renie?"

Renie shrugged her shoulders.

"I do not care for any of them," she said.

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"*None* of them—no one at all? Haven't you ever met *anybody* you cared for?"

"Yes," said Renie, "I have met somebody. But I would not love him."

"Would not? How strange!" The girl fixed her large blue eyes on the other's face. "Why?" and then she added in a low tone: "Was he not worthy?"

"Yes," said Renie, "he was worthy, but I was not. I did not feel that I could be—like him. He was different—earnest and honest. And when I thought of my own frivolity I just couldn't *dare* to love him," concluded the child Renie, the same child who had argued a certain question with Mr. Jason Sherwood two years before. "Sometimes," she went on, in a dreamy voice, "do you know what happens? I get up to my feet, thinking that he wants me—that if I go to the door I will meet him— Foolish, isn't it?" she broke off.

"It is *lovely*," said Lorna. "Oh, when two people really care, it is wonderful. Helen cared, Renie—Helen did love that man. And I think her love will make him better if he is not good now."

"Well," said Renie, the philosopher, "I only know that I don't want to make any one good. The man I think I love is good, and that is the reason I *do* care for him. He is my superior. I couldn't lift a man above me—make him my superior, and then honor him because he is so. No."

"Would you like to see Helen and the man she married?" asked Lorna, with the air of imparting a great secret, or of conferring a favor. "Father could not bear to have her picture in the house, so we had to hide or destroy them all. But one time Helen had her photograph taken with Alfred. And I kept it. I will let you see it, if you care to, Renie."

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"I would," said Renie. "I think Helen was like you somewhat—fair and gentle and slim like you—"

"Oh, *no!*" said Lorna, emphatically. "Helen was beautiful."

"And you are, too—with the beauty of a wild rose," thought Renie. She stood there while Lorna ran back into the house for her treasure.

"You will see what a difference there is in us two—and then I will describe her to you, and you will be able to construct her for yourself," said Lorna, gaily. "I don't think Helen will ever change."

She held out the card to Renie, who took it, looking at it with eyes that seemed to distend suddenly. Her lips parted—her face went ashen white.

"What is it?" asked Lorna, uneasily. "You—you surely don't know her?"

"Know her?" said Renie, mechanically. "How could I know her?"

"Or him? Perhaps you know Alfred?"

"Is that her—her husband?" asked Renie. But the words cost her something. "Why do you look at me so strangely, Lorna?"

"You are as white as death."

"I am? But I must be—I feel faint—a strange sensation for me."

"Shall I get you a glass of water?"

"No, no—it is gone. Rather, let us sit down here, and tell me about your sister. Or may I do some imagining? She is dark, instead of blonde—her hair is coal-black?"

"Yes, yes," said Lorna, in a flutter of pleasure. "Very black hair, and beautiful white skin, and soft gray eyes, with lashes

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much longer than mine—even though you say mine are so long. Tall, too, and very graceful."

"She must have been a beauty," said Renie, under her breath.

"Must have been? Why, she *is*. Helen will not change."

"Of course not," said Renie, abstractedly. "Of course not."

Late that evening Mr. Vernon came to her, with anxious countenance, as she sat in the parlor.

"Lorna tells me you were faint this afternoon—and I have noticed myself that you were looking ill. What is the matter?"

"A very great deal," said Renie, strangely. "Much that concerns you; much that will worry you—yes, break your heart, I am afraid."

"Lorna!" he looked across at the girl with trepidation.

"No," she said, "not Lorna. To-day, for the first time, Lorna showed me Helen's picture. I am with you a year and I have never seen it. Perhaps that was my fault—since I avoided mention of her always. But to-day—"

"To-day?" he asked, in a whisper.

"I saw Helen—and I recognized her."

He sat staring straight before him.

"I recognized her—husband, also. Who he may be, I do not know. I saw him twice. He was the man who—annoyed me in the train that day—when I first met you."

He bowed his head.

"Yes," he said, "I know it. I had forbidden him the house even then. We had a terrible quarrel. Helen promised me to relinquish him forever. We traveled in that train as strangers together to the city. I would not speak to him. My daughter's folly had made speech necessary twice. But I would not hold converse with a man I despised. Perhaps it was mere bravado

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prompted him to address you, thinking you some foolish little schoolgirl who would permit such action on his part. He insulted me often and openly. And, when I returned—when I came back after that—Helen was gone."

The words choked him.

"No man but a blackguard could act so—no man but a blackguard. And my Helen, my beautiful girl—"

He could not go on. There was a mist before his eyes.

"I dare not tell you what I know—not while Lorna is here. Mr. Vernon," went on Renie, "you must prepare for the very worst—" She broke off, hurriedly. "Lorna, dear," she said, "will you ask Mary if she saw my light jacket anywhere about when she fixed my room to-day?"

The young girl jumped up, willingly. Renie turned to the father.

"Your Helen is out of trouble forever," she said. "Try to feel that God is wise, and does all things well—"

"You can not mean that she is—"

Renie nodded her head affirmatively. Then, reaching over, she took his hands in hers, holding them tightly.

"Try to realize it to-night," she said. "To-morrow I will tell you, in so far as I know it—how she died."

For the girl who she had been told was Helen Vernon was the beautiful unknown whose body had been found floating in the waters of the river, close to the shore, on that day when she and Julian Sherwood and Mrs. McRae had gone out rowing. The face had been printed indelibly on her memory—she could never forget it."

And they said that there had been the print of cruel fingers on her throat! That her hands had been tied! That there had

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been a bruise upon her temple! Oh, what a story was that to tell the father of a well-beloved child!

* * * * *

He came to her the next morning, and he listened, while, in as softened speech as she could frame, she told him of the finding of the body in the river, of the glimpse she had had of the face, and of the mystery connected with her death. Then she told him of the mysterious appearance of Davis, as she now knew his name to be, upon the balcony of the hotel. This was significant to her at the moment only because it showed that he was present in the vicinity when her body was found.

"I may possibly be mistaken," ended Renie. "The resemblance may be a fleeting one. My memory is very faithful, however, and if it is really she, I think—"

"That we should settle it," said Mr. Vernon. He looked ghastly. "I do not doubt that he grew tired of her; perhaps she bothered him, and he got rid of her. He was a villain—yes, villain enough to stoop to murder, even the murder of his wife." He sat with contracted brows of pain, staring straight in front of him, and Renie, rising, left him to his own sad thoughts, knowing that when he needed her he would come to her.

And so he did, a half hour later.

"We must go there," he said. "I must be sure. Will you come with me?"

"Yes," said Renie. Her heart gave a great bound. "There" meant—what? Walter McRae, perhaps? But no. She would probably never hear from him, never see him again.

"We will investigate"—there was a hard look in his eyes—"and although it costs me every cent I possess, I shall never cease until I have brought the murderer to justice."

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"If it is she," said Renie.

He sighed.

"God help me," he said. "God help me. I need no assurance. Would my daughter Helen leave me in ignorance of her whereabouts two whole years? She was my own dear, affectionate girl, until the blight of love for a wicked man fell upon her. And she knew that I would gladly take her back into my heart again if ever she wished to come. She knew her father's roof was always here to shelter her."

The sadness in his voice stirred Renie. She looked at him with moist eyes.

"I wish I had had a father like you," she said. "I, who have never known the love of parents—or cared—wish now that I had had a father like you."

"You are my own dear daughter, little stranger," he said. "You won your place with me when you gave me back my Lorna. You were sent by God to take Helen's vacant chair. And you must never leave us."

She smiled a little—it would have been hard to read the meaning of that smile.

"We dare not tell Lorna the truth," he said. "And yet we can not go on a journey without giving her some excuse. May I leave that to you? For, Renie, it is impossible for me to think of anything clearly. My brain seems in a whirl. I am anxious—God knows how anxious, to be up and doing—to get away—to find out the truth. God help me."

"Come," said Renie, tenderly. "As for Lorna, I shall try to think as to what had best be done with her. Would not her health be a good excuse to take us there? And afterward, if your fears are realized, I shall come home with her, and stay with her until

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I am needed. There will be some sort of an investigation, I suppose."

"Arrange it so," he said. "Whatever you think best."

So Lorna was delighted the following day, when Renie informed her that the three were going for a jaunt of a week or so to one of the seaside resorts.

"It is too early for the crowds to be there," she said, "and it will do you good."

Lorna did not question the benefit of salt air so early in May—since Renie said it was all right, it must be so. And she set about her packing cheerfully, singing under her breath, running up and down stairs on the slightest provocation, and behaving, in general, like a spoiled child. To her father her merriment seemed ghastly, yet not for worlds would he have checked it.

"No, poor girl," he said. "Her life will be clouded soon enough. Let her be happy while she may."

Renie, too, felt how striking was the contrast between the girl's exuberance of spirits and the sorrowful journey upon which they were going. Our heroine no longer felt so young nor so careless as she had been when Maria Sherwood heaped heavy burden of physical labors on her shoulders. Then her spirit had been untamed. But now, the great sorrow that was in the world seemed to have opened her eyes. She had seen so much of it, she thought, so very much. Especially had this last year with the Vernons opened her eyes. Her religion had become more to her. She felt that it was real and practical, and that only by clinging to it could she hope for happiness. She must have it for a bulwark; she must use it as she used her daily food—to sustain her soul.

All this she *lived*. She learned, and in learning, meekly,

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humbly, she was teaching those around her. Already had her influence begun to tell. She never would dare think that this was so—she was too humble in her new-found trust and faith. It had been a casual thing before. Now it was becoming part of herself.

The old carelessness, the old indifference, slipped off into the past. Her heart was awake; she could feel now. Life meant more to her—a soberer thing. And though the old lightheartedness had gone, never to return, she knew that she had gained; that she had exchanged it for a nobler life, a fuller, sweeter, more complete existence. An existence in which she felt the nearness of Christ and His love.

All this she had learned in one short year, ministering to the wants of others. Not the wants of the Vernon household alone—for she went about, doing good where she found it to do, as she had planned for her life in Broadplains. "I will be free," she had said to the birds and flowers that morning of Mrs. Sherwood's death. "I will be free—I will taste freedom," she had told Jason Sherwood. And she had tasted freedom.

She had gone where she pleased, done as she pleased, and yet there had been something missing. But now she had taken her Redeemer and His dear Mother; she had taken the Sacraments and our holy Church; she had bound herself to them, making them more completely a part of her life. She would be true to her own soul. Out of bondage, indeed, so far as material things were concerned, but fastened forever to a living faith.

And she rejoiced thereat.

With the reality that this had brought her, the sense of understanding, a different feeling had grown in her toward Walter McRae. She felt that she had scarcely been capable of judging him in the past. She would not take the warmth of the sentiments

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she entertained for any real expression of love. She knew that she would look at things differently—in a different spirit now. Would Walter McRae be to her as he had been in those few moments ere she took herself out of his life?

She had looked upon his love for her with dazzled eyes. The possibilities of it awed her soul. She wanted freedom, and with this love standing at the threshold of her heart, how long would freedom last? So she escaped from it, heedless of consequences. The consequences might be lasting regret—for, let what would come or go, she loved Walter McRae. Not feverishly or passionately—but simply and steadfastly. Her affection was to the transient affections of other women as the flickering candle-light to the steady glow of the sun, never extinguished, no matter how clouded over.

So it was a new Renie who faced the future now; a new Renie who sat beside Mr. Vernon and his daughter, and cheered, with her gentle speech, the onward journey. A journey of anticipation to one happy heart, of sorrow to a saddened one, and of fate to the girl we know the best.

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CHAPTER XIV.

RENIE REMEMBERS.

RENIE was going to her fate. She did not know it, but the settlement of her future awaited her at the end of this journey.

"You know something about the place—to which hotel shall we go?" asked Mr. Vernon. She told him. She had a fancy to see the places which would speak of Walter McRae's presence to her. She wondered what had become of Margaret. Had she recovered her reason? She had told Mr. Vernon and Lorna of the happenings of those last eventful days, and Lorna was curious now to see the house in which they had transpired.

"Perhaps *she* will be there," said the girl, with bated breath. "I think I should like to look at her—and run away."

Renie laughed.

"Silly girl! You'd love her. She was as nice as she could be; such a sad, sad face! And such mournful gray eyes! Oh, no, Lorna, you wouldn't run away. You'd stand and look at her, and wish you could put your arms about her, and try to make her happy. Sometimes—"

She paused. They were driving along the deserted beach, on their way to the hotel, and she looked out across the water. The remembrance of that eventful day on which the three—she and Mrs. McRae and Julian Sherwood—had gone out upon the dancing river—came back to her, and she shuddered.

"Do you ever feel sorry for yourself?" asked Lorna.

Renie looked at her.

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"Why do you ask that question?"

"Every time you grow sad it is always because some one else is suffering," said Lorna. "Never for yourself."

"I haven't time to be sorry—even if I had a reason," said Renie. "My life is too happy."

She was looking about her eagerly as she spoke. How changed everything seemed; changed and queer—more desolate. What a difference people made in a place! She remembered it so gay, with many figures moving to and fro, with gayly-clad women, and men in flannels. And the old priest—her glance traveled wistfully along the road, which she could see now as they approached the hotel. Her one talent! Was it a talent to give comfort to other people? It seemed all that she was fit for.

She smiled humorously. Her thoughts went back to her first dance with Julian Sherwood—how she, almost ignorant of the art, had pretended that he himself had been crudely taught. She remembered, this time with a pang, her midnight visit to the good Father and Walter McRae's darkening face as he met her upon her return—the words he had spoken before she left him so hurriedly. It was her last remembrance of him.

She had not seen him when she awoke from the deadly stupor into which Mrs. McRae had sent her. She had not seen him then or afterward. Ah, well! If he met her now would he see her? Would he *know* her? She shivered a little. What a horrible thought that was to come—now. Now, when she *knew*.

Mr. Vernon was engaging the rooms. She came forward quickly and stood near him. The man did not recognize her, although she remembered him distinctly.

"You have a suite on the first floor," she said. "I was here a year ago last summer, and had those rooms—myself and a friend.

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"I should like them again. The front rooms overlooking the river." She turned to Mr. Vernon. "You will like them, and Lorna and I will occupy one together," she said. "They are the pleasantest rooms in the house."

The man looked at her strangely.

"Are you sure you were here a year ago?" he asked.

"A year ago—it will be two years in August," said Renie. "Mrs. McRae and I occupied the suite. By the way, can you tell me if Mrs. McRae was here last year?"

The man hesitated.

"That was the hard luck year—the year you came," he said, with a deprecatory air. "Business was abominable last year on account of it."

"Is that so?" said Renie. "That is too bad. But this year people will have forgotten." She smiled encouragingly. "I think I know what you mean."

She turned away then. She would find out about Mrs. McRae later. As the maid led the way for Mr. Vernon and Lorna, Renie followed.

Facing her at the foot of the stairs, with a look of utter astonishment on his face, stood Julian Sherwood.

The girl paused, transfixed. Julian Sherwood, of all people! The very one whom Mr. Vernon wanted to see—the very one who could give him the most information. She bowed to him at last, and advancing, held out her hand. He did not even pretend to take it. There was a very frigid expression upon his face.

"You have come back again—to renew pleasant memories?" he said. His tone was so disagreeable that Renie wrinkled her brows, not angry, but wondering.

"I might ask you the same question," she said, pleasantly

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enough, "if I was sure that you meant it in the way I should. I am very glad to see you."

"Thank you," and again he bowed.

"I have been out of the world altogether since," she went on. She would not permit him to be so distant. His anger at her sudden flight must not interfere with the pursuit of Mr. Vernon's quest now. "May I ask you a question that has been tormenting me often since?"

"It is a lady's privilege to ask questions."

But Renie was too much in earnest to reply as he expected her to.

"Have you heard from Mrs. McRae? Is she better? Has she ever had another attack? Where is she now? Will she come here this summer?"

The young man tottered against the broad newel-post, and, with open mouth and staring eyes, faced her.

"Good God in heaven!" he said. "What do you mean?"

Some fear made Renie shrink from him. She could not understand what it was, but it frightened her.

"Oh, nothing has happened her?" she exclaimed. "Poor soul—Mr. McRae did not send her to an asylum, I hope? She was not really—"

"Mrs. McRae is dead," said Sherwood, harshly. "Is it possible that you are ignorant of a story that has been the talk of the criminal courts this last twelve months? Mrs. McRae is dead, and Walter McRae killed her."

Alas, for Renie! At those brutal words her brain seemed to reel. She cried out, as if something had struck her, and would have fallen had he not caught her outstretched hand in his, stricken with compunction at the effect that speech had had upon

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her. She had wondered if she loved Walter McRae. The fear, the horror, the benumbing terror of that moment stood out in all her future life. She never forgot it.

"Oh, no!" she moaned now. "Oh, no! That is not true—say it is not true! He would not do a thing like that—he would not. I know him too well—"

"Come," said Sherwood, in a gentle voice. "Come, Miss Sherewode, come. I think you are in earnest now—forgive me my cruel words. But it has been so hard and so trying this past long year. So hard on him, and on me, who am helpless, utterly helpless, to do him any good. The lawyers' wrangling has kept him from the electric chair—nothing else."

Renie could not speak. She put her hand to her head.

"Mr. Sherwood, give me a moment. I am lost. I do not know what you are saying. What is it? Who is it? Walter accused of her—*death?* She is dead, then? You are sure?"

"Come into the parlor here—this is no place for a discussion," said Sherwood. "Come."

She obeyed him, her apathy giving way to feverish anxiety.

"Where have you been that this case has never come to your eyes?" he asked. "I—and Walter, too—felt that you had read about it, and that you considered him guilty. And yet he was so assured that in spite of your seeming coldness you would come to him when he needed you, when friend after friend fell away, until only I am left—"

"Don't," said Renie, sinking her teeth into her lip. "Don't. Oh!" she cried, bitterly. "Is this why God permitted me to go away? That the man I love with all my heart might suffer a double pang, thinking he had bestowed his affection on a coward? Oh, how cruel, how cruel!"

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She could think of nothing else for the moment, but wrung her hands together. A great light shone in Julian Sherwood's eyes.

"Do you mean it?" he asked, tempestuously. "Do you really mean it—that you care for him? He is in disgrace, remember—will probably never be cleared of it. And you think that you care?"

"Oh, care!" exclaimed Renie, in scorn. "I love him, I tell you. And this—oh, please tell me! Tell me how it has happened—what it means."

"The day you left," he said, "Walter had sent for an alienist to New York. He came, and they had dinner together, not wishing to disturb Mrs. McRae, who was, apparently, asleep. They went up after dinner, and, finding her lying in the same position on the bed, went to wake her. She—was dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Renie.

"She had been dead an hour—perhaps more. Then it was discovered that you were missing. At first they thought that you had had something to do with it. But later— Well, when the autopsy was performed, it was found that she had died from the effects of poison. Then to trace how it was administered. The last person seen with her had been McRae himself, and he had given her a drink of water from the tumbler on the dresser. Susie, the maid, testified to this. What led to the inquiry was that the detective, carefully searching for evidence, found arsenic concealed in a chink of the woodwork in McRae's room. He swore he never bought arsenic in his life—but a slip of white paper, which had evidently contained the deadly dose, was found stuffed down in one of the interstices of the drain in Mrs. McRae's washstand. When taken out, and compared, it was found exactly the same as those wrapped around the poison in her stepson's room. The evidence is purely circumstantial; the case has been carried to court after

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court—it is in the Supreme Court now, and that ends it. Walter protests his innocence, but then all guilty men do the same. The fact that he was to profit by Mrs. McRae's death—when first married her husband had made over most of his fortune to her, at her death to revert to Walter—this and the great fear she always had for him plainly show to a sceptical world that Walter McRae thought the time opportune to dispose of her to further his ends, supposing that her death would be laid at her own door."

Renie was speechless now. She sat with her eyes riveted upon his face. He spoke slowly, so that she might fully understand.

"Thinking that you would read of the event," went on Sherwood, "and being convinced that his arrest would be a temporary affair, the poor fellow seemed almost to welcome the blow that would bring you back to him. He considered it a question of days ere he received his freedom. But—you did not come, and he is still in prison."

A long sigh escaped the girl's lips.

"I must try to get it clear," she said. "Meanwhile—" She thought, then, of Mr. Vernon. "I can not forget others in my selfishness. I have been staying with the people whom you saw come in with me. Some days ago I was shown, by chance, a portrait of the eldest daughter, who disappeared from her home in the company of a worthless scoundrel. The moment I saw the picture I recognized it as that of the poor, beautiful girl whom we found that dreadful morning—you remember—"

He nodded.

"Her father has come to search for her—you will help him?" She caught her breath. "I did not know I was coming to such sorrow of my own. Please do not think me strange, now. I must be alone. This is—very hard."

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The lump in her throat choked her. He bowed—and went to the door, but coming back, took her hand in his, and brought it to his lips.

"Walter will not mind dying—if you are true to him," he said, huskily. "Forgive me, that I misjudged you."

She shook her head, smiling—she could not speak. The smile was sadder than any tears could have been. Her heart was loyal to those surrounding her—how much more loyal to the man she loved. She seemed to understand the sickening anguish he endured when the days went on and on, and he heard nothing from her. She had come into his life, he had loved her, and then she had left him. When trials came, he had to bear them alone.

After what seemed to be a long, long while she stood upon her feet, and made her way to the first story. After all, she had her life to face. Would he see her, she asked herself, and would he believe in her? Would he? In what way could she prove her loyalty and her devotion to him? How could she prove that she really cared? To offer to marry him—yes, she could do that. But she was poor, while he— What would the world say to such a step? Merely that she wished to secure comfort, ease, riches. The world! Was she to care for the world, or its criticism?

She entered the room. Lorna had already started to unpack. She glanced up at Renie, not noticing her changed face.

"So you have met a friend already?" she asked, in her girlish voice. "How delightful! Was it some one you knew *very* well, Renie? Earnest and honest—and all that?"

She laughed at her own drollery, and started to her feet with a merry laugh, intending to tease her friend. Instead, when she saw her, she gave a cry of fear.

"Renie! Renie! What ails you? You are ill?"

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" No," said Renie. " Only—I have heard bad news. It will be all right. Don't worry."

She walked to the window. It was her old room. She stood looking out at the sea. How changed! How frightfully changed! How cold, how gray, how miserably cold and gray! She recalled the last moments spent here with horror. She seemed to feel the print of fingers on her throat—the poor madwoman's fingers . . . the poor soul—she hoped God would be merciful. She remembered the note she had written to Walter McRae—ah, what a cold, paltry note to write to the man she loved! Who *was* that creature who had been able to do so heartless a thing? She remembered . . .

What?

She clutched at the window-sill, her breath trying to come in sobs . . .

God, what did she remember?

The man upon the balcony—the man with the bold, handsome, evil countenance—yes, yes; he had gone to Mrs. McRae's room . . . he had given her the package. She had seen it—she, she, herself—had seen it . . .

By this time every breath was a labored sob. She turned in her frightened horror, holding to the sill to support her body.

" Oh, go," she said. " Call your father—call him, call him."

He came at Lorna's startled cry.

" Get Mr. Sherwood—he is downstairs," she said. " Get him."

Julian Sherwood came. Lorna was at her wits' end, wringing her hands, not knowing what to do. Puzzled, Sherwood came in and stood beside her.

" On the day—on which I left—here," said Renie, " I saw a man—on this balcony. His name is Davis. He gave Mrs. McRae

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a white package—I saw it. Oh, God, I remember. Oh, thank God, I remember!"

She pitched forward, white, senseless, into Julian Sherwood's arms.

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CHAPTER XV.

A NEW COMPLICATION.

ALFRED DAVIS had been the chief witness against Walter McRae. He was sorry, he had informed the court suavely, that the accused had always been unfriendly to him. It arose from a mistake which occurred while both were traveling and studying abroad.

The fact that he swore to was the most condemning of all that had been presented. The druggist, from whom it had been discovered the arsenic had been purchased, had not been able to say who bought it on the day specified; he remembered selling it distinctly. It was given on a physician's order—the physician in question being one who had been sojourning at the hotel in which were the McRaes, and who swore positively that the prescription was not in his writing, and that the signature had been forged. Alfred Davis testified that he saw Walter McRae leave the store at the hour in which the chemist said he had sold the poison.

In vain Walter McRae's lawyer sneered at the idea of any man intending to commit murder leaving such a trace as this behind him. In the face of Alfred Davis' unshaken testimony, which he gave time after time without altering it a jot, the sneers of the lawyer fell to the ground. It seemed the one link in the chain.

And now, when Renie recovered consciousness, and told the story of that mysterious visitor; of how she had wondered at his appearance, and of her own subsequent flight and dismissal of this subject from her mind, Julian Sherwood's heart leaped. They

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were together in the sitting-room which made part of the suite Mr. Vernon had secured, and Renie related the tale to him and the young man.

"Alfred Davis is Walter's enemy—has been for years," said Julian. "I am privileged to tell you how the enmity was first incurred. I am sure that Walter would not object now. Davis attended, for a short while, the university at which McRae was a student. They were pretty good friends for a while. One day, while they were riding together, McRae's horse threw a little girl walking along the country road. He was greatly shocked at the accident, put the child on his horse, carried her to her home, and leaving money to defray expenses, went back to his rooms. After that, being very busy—it was his last year and my second (it was there I first became acquainted with him)—he asked Davis to attend to the matter. Davis went, presumably once a week, and finally brought news that the child was dead. Walter, in great distress, sent money—he had been sending money all the time—and gave Davis a good round sum for the parents. After that he considered the event closed.

"Davis left shortly, and when Walter took his degree, he thought it would be a simple act of courtesy to visit the people whom he had, by sore mischance, deprived of their little daughter. What was his surprise, when he reached their house, to discover that the child was alive and well, that Davis had been there once or twice to make inquiries, but that no money had been given them.

"McRae saw no more of Davis until he came back to the States. Coming down the Drive in New York City one day, he met him face to face. He had long since made up his mind what to do with him if ever he came across him. He gave him, on the

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spot, the soundest trouncing he had ever received, probably, in all his life. A crowd gathered, of course, and McRae was taken into custody—but Davis refused to make any charges. He threatened vengeance, however. His evidence at the trial is probably one way of securing it."

Renie looked at Mr. Vernon. His face was very haggard—his lips white. She pitied him from the bottom of her heart. This further evidence of the perfidy of the man his unfortunate girl had loved, but served to make the thing he dreaded more possible. Lorna, too, was much distressed. The similarity of names worried her, although she had not yet realized that this man and her sister's husband was the same.

"It can't be Helen's Alfred," she had said, in the beginning of the tale. At its close, Renie stood up.

"Let us leave Mr. Vernon and Mr. Sherwood together," she began. "We have much to do, if we intend to stay here a week. We will be back very soon," she added, in conclusion. "Lorna is anxious to see what this place has to offer in the way of sights, I know."

"And we are not half unpacked," added Lorna. "I must finish, Renie—while papa and Mr. Sherwood discuss what is best to be done. How fortunate that we came at this time," she added, as they left the room together, and putting her arm affectionately about Renie's waist.

"Very fortunate," said Renie. "God has been good to us."

Left alone, Mr. Vernon, in return, told the younger man of his own sorrowful mission. He described his daughter, showed Julian her picture, which he, too, immediately recognized, as well as that of her husband. And, as if to further dispel all doubts, there had been the initials "H. V. D." found embroidered on her garments.

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Poor Mr. Vernon could not speak, when his worst fears were thus verified.

"What shall we do with this black-hearted villain?" he groaned. "Is death enough? My poor little girl!"

"I think I had better do one thing now—leave for the city immediately, call on Walter's counsel, and have a good man put on the case. In the meantime, until you hear from us, you must keep very quiet. Perhaps by fixing the murder of your daughter upon this Davis, we can also find and be able to prove his guilt in the McRae case. I shall leave on the next train, and shall wire you at once if anything occurs—even if I hear the slightest news."

"What did they do with Helen?" asked Mr. Vernon, in a choked voice.

"After I found her," said Julian, "I noticed about her throat a fine gold chain, to which was attached a locket. On opening it I saw a picture of my friend Walter, and knowing what an annoyance it would mean to him—he had had enough of such, I knew, at the time of his father's death—I took it away, thinking that probably he was acquainted with her. He was lost in amazement at the fact that she had a picture of him in her possession, and hired a detective from one of the private agencies to search into the affair. He suspected Davis of having something to do with it, at that, but Davis had not been seen anywhere about here—the villain kept himself very well hidden, and his presence was not known until after Walter's arrest. The confusion resulting then put the other thing out of my mind; the detective gave it up—his expenses not being forthcoming, I suppose, and I was too much bothered to think about it. As for what became of her body, well—" he hesitated, in a confused way—"I am not poor, and it would have been a pity to see so beautiful a girl buried in public ground. So

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I— You'll find her in the cemetery attached to the church farther up the road, and will know her grave by the initials 'H. V. D.' and the date of her finding carved upon her tombstone."

Mr. Vernon could not speak. He looked at the young man's embarrassed face through a mist of tears. He put out his hand, which the other grasped, and held tightly. Sobs burst from his throat—and Julian Sherwood felt his own eyes grow moist with sympathy. At that moment there sprang up in each heart a bond of union that was to last between them until death.

"God—God bless you," said the unhappy father. He wrung his hand, dropped it, and turned away. Sherwood, respecting his grief, went to the window. Left alone, Mr. Vernon succeeded in recovering his composure.

"I shall await your telegram with impatience," he said. "Simple justice demands that this creature be brought to a standstill in his career. Who knows how many other innocent people have been his dupes or his victims?"

"Yes," said Sherwood, "but things look brighter now than they have done in a long time for poor McRae. You would be sorry for him, if you knew what he has suffered this past year—everything gone, good name, honor, reputation, interest—and the girl he cared for."

"You mean Renie?"

"Yes."

Mr. Vernon glanced at him.

"And Renie loves him?"

"Yes—she says so."

"If she says so, it is true," said Mr. Vernon, "and I hope he is worthy of her. She is a pearl among women."

"He is worthy of her," said Julian Sherwood, loyally.

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"Worthy even of her. But now, will you ask her if she has any message? Tell her I am going to him."

"No," said Renie, in response to the question which the young man himself put to her, "I have no message." She gave her hand to Julian Sherwood, adding simply: "I shall bring the message. I am going to him, also."

"When?" asked the young man, with a half-smile. How like the impulsive girl he remembered! "I do not want you to go to-day—it would spoil my plans. We must not be seen in company."

"Then I shall go alone," said Renie.

"You can not do that, either. You must not go near him until I have seen his lawyer."

"Just to tell him—"

"I know. It is a temptation to allow you to come," said Julian. "It is, really, because I know just how happy it would make him. But I can't spoil this glorious chance of freedom for him. Be guided by me, now, Miss Sherewode. Afterward you will not be sorry."

"I suppose—I must," said Renie; but the disappointment in her face touched him.

"Send a message," he said, "if it is only a line—"

"Tell him, then, that every word you say is true," she said, in an undertone.

"And I shall say?"

"All that I have told you—everything."

"That you love—"

"That first, last, and all the time," said Renie, while the blood mounted to her forehead.

"It is just as well you can not come," said Sherwood, slowly.

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"He will need a message like that to prepare for—what will follow. For your visit, and for the acknowledgment of it from your own lips."

Renie did not say anything to this. As he turned away, she said:

"What comes after may not appeal to him. Tell him that I am only Renie Desmond. That, though given the right to bear the name of Sherewode by one who really wished me well, that is not my right name." She fastened her bright eyes upon him. "I was only a little country girl, anxious to be free, anxious to know what life is like. I came to it, finding the way made unexpectedly clear by a certain gift. I am a poor girl; I never knew my parents—they were, in all probability, poor and humble like myself. Tell him all this. Let him know me just as I am."

"But you do not act—you do not seem—" said Sherwood, in perplexity.

Renie lifted her shoulders.

"No?" she said. "That is my good fortune, then. I am not ashamed of myself—there is something in me that would not let me be, ever. Whomsoever I came from were good people; intuition tells me that. But I know nothing of them."

"I thank you for your confidence," said Julian, in a soft tone, "and I think that intuition may well serve you as a guide."

"I, also," acquiesced Renie, with the supreme satisfaction that she displayed in all her worldly affairs. "It contents me."

"When next I see you I hope to have better news," he said.

"I shall pray that you may," she answered.

* * * * *

Three days passed by, and no word came from Julian Sherwood. At the end of that time, Mr. Vernon could no longer

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restrain his desire to visit the grave of his beloved child. He had already ascertained the location of the cemetery, but to guard against unnecessary curiosity, he waited until dusk of the third day. Bearing Julian Sherwood's warning in mind, he put on his light overcoat, and went out, intending to turn up the collar as soon as he reached the road, since the air was quite sharp enough to serve as an excuse for this action.

He found the graveyard without any trouble, not having to ask a single question, following the path described to him between trees just clothed in the budding sweetness of spring, to the little cemetery. Trees guarded it, and the grass was spreading its green covering over the mounds. They were well cared for, that he saw, and conspicuous among the smaller headstones was the plain and simple white shaft, on which were inscribed the simple initials "H. V. D." and the date when the body of the poor girl had been found. He leaned upon the cold stone, giving way fully to his sorrow. He could do this—there was none to see him; there was no human being to observe his misery. His face had aged rapidly within this last week—he looked old and broken now, as he rested against the stone covering the remains of her he would have given his own life to save.

"My little girl!" he said, "my little girl! I had rather you lay here than be the unhappy partner of that man's life. I hope God will be merciful to you—you were tender and good, and you paid for your mistake, dear child, you paid."

Much more he said in that broken speech that loving grief knows so well. He felt that here he had something tangible, something that was hers, and, by that reason, his; if it were so permitted, he hoped she could listen to his words, and be assured of his love, in the great unknown world she had entered upon.

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An hour fled. Finally he tore himself away, picking a little leaf from the vine just beginning to put forth its tendrils, and carried it with him—a reminder until he could come again. His journey homeward was slow; he was filled with painful thoughts, and his step kept pace with them. When he reached the hotel he was surprised to see Julian Sherwood standing at the entrance, waiting.

"You here!" he exclaimed. "I had no knowledge of your arrival."

"No—I thought it better to come on and tell you all I know. I have brought Mr. Van Dyke, the lawyer, and Mr. Sibbs, the detective, with me. We have found great encouragement within the past few days. And Mr. Sibbs wishes to see Miss Renie and yourself."

"I am ready," said Mr. Vernon. "I could resist the temptation no longer—I had to go down to Helen's grave—I had to go."

"I understand," said Sherwood. "We are afraid Davis got wind of something—he left the city yesterday, and Sibbs traced him as far as the station below this. He may mean mischief. At any rate, Sibbs has a warrant for his arrest in his pocket, which he will put into execution the minute he claps eyes on him. Do you know where Miss Renie is?"

"With Lorna, I suppose," said Mr. Vernon. "They are inseparable."

"Miss Lorna says she left the house about an hour ago. I suppose, like yourself, she had some place she greatly desired to see. She will return, no doubt, in a short while."

Mr. Vernon found both Mr. Van Dyke and Mr. Sibbs very courteous and genial. The matter under consideration was, of course, the main topic, and in its discussion an hour slipped by

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easily. At last Julian Sherwood looked up with a somewhat puzzled face.

"It is queer that Miss Renie has not come in yet," he said. "She would know that we want her."

"I shall find out if she is with Lorna," answered Mr. Vernon.

He found Lorna coming to seek him. Renie had been gone two hours and a half; she was beginning to worry. It was pitch dark now, and it had begun to rain. Where in the world could the girl have gone to?

"She has no friends about here, that I am aware of," said Mr. Vernon anxiously. "It could never be possible—"

He looked at Julian Sherwood.

"That not hearing from me she went on to the city to see Walter!" cried Sherwood. "I hope not. She was always such an impulsive little being—"

Mr. Sibbs looked up quietly.

"Ask some one else," he said. "Probably she was seen leaving the house, and might have left a message—"

One of the maids, appearing in answer to Mr. Vernon's ring, he requested her to send the clerk to him. When that gentleman appeared, it was Mr. Sibbs who questioned him.

"You know Miss Sherewode?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"She left the house about six o'clock. Did she leave any message?"

"No, sir—not after reading the note—"

"The note? What note?"

"Some one brought her a note. She read it quickly and went upstairs to get her things, I suppose, because she came down in a few minutes with her hat and coat on."

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The four men exchanged dismayed glances. Here was a nice complication.

"Can you remember what sort of a messenger it was?"

"A boy, sir—one of the country boys from around here—I know the cut of them all."

"You don't know which particular boy?"

"Oh, no; I didn't look close at him. I just saw the tousled head and the rusty clothes, and didn't give him a second glance."

"I'll go down to the hall with you," said the detective, rising. "Perhaps I can find the note. She might have left it behind her."

But search availed nothing. There wasn't a trace of the note in hall, on stairs, or in her room. She had said nothing to Lorna, beyond the word that she would explain everything on her return. She had seemed greatly excited, Lorna thought.

Renie had completely disappeared.

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CHAPTER XVI.

A SPEEDY RESCUE.

"COME to me at once. Have important news for you, but can not bring it. Walk to the cross-roads, where my messenger will meet you. Do not talk to him, as he knows nothing. Destroy this note. JULIAN SHERWOOD."

This was the brief communication which had sent Renie so hurriedly from the house. The note she thrust into her bosom, thinking to destroy it on the way. As she came to the cross-roads in the gathering dusk, a figure muffled up to the eyes greeted her in a rough tone.

"You are from Mr. Sherwood?" she asked.

He nodded. She remembered the injunction that she was not to talk to this man. She wondered what Julian Sherwood had to tell her, as she went on, her rapid steps keeping pace with the stride of her companion. He was evidently in a hurry. Their way led back into the country, and, as they branched off into the woods, and the path became indefinite, he put out his hand to help her. Some unaccountable feeling of terror swept over her at the touch. She paused, undecided whether to continue or not. It was very dark now, and she felt the first patter of rain-drops on her cheek. She forgot that Julian Sherwood had told her not to speak to him.

"Where are we going?" she asked, sharply. "Are you sure you know the way?"

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"Yes," he answered. "It is not far now. This is the shorter path. In a moment you will see the light in the house."

The prompt answer allayed her rising suspicions somewhat. After all, it probably was a shorter cut, although a more difficult one. She stumbled on, until, just as he had said, there appeared a faint light in the darkness. It was shining from the upper windows of a house—what sort of a house she could not imagine as she gazed at it, in sudden fright at its loneliness.

"What a *dreadful* place," she said. "Mr. Sherwood is waiting here—"

The man ran up the steps, leaving her free to follow or not, as she pleased. The action satisfied her that he was not deceiving her, so she went after him. There was no light in the hall, but the light from the open door of an upper room cast its faint reflection down the stairs. As Renie hesitated on the threshold the man turned and gripped her arm. He lifted her from her feet, and carried her, the stairs creaking under him. When he reached the room he put her down and, slamming the door behind him, threw open his overcoat and tore away his muffler. The girl looked at him, all the horror in her heart displayed on her face.

"*You!*" she said. "You!"

He bowed, his handsome countenance wreathed in an evil smile.

"Even I—at your service, most fair lady. Are you pleased to see me?"

She hurriedly glanced from him about the bare room. It was devoid of furniture; the windows were bare, the sole light was a tallow candle, stuck in a bottle, on the mantelpiece.

"Do you not like the castle to which I have brought you?" he asked again, with devilish mockery in his voice. "Not quite so luxuriantly furnished as you might wish, but it will serve. Look

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about you once—take a good look at it. You will not have long to see many things in this world."

The girl drew herself to her full height.

"Your day is near at hand," she said, briefly. "I don't care when or how death comes to me. You can't continue in your crimes forever. And I leave two to avenge me."

"Julian Sherwood, perhaps, and—"

"Walter McRae—the man you are afraid of, you coward!"

The words were flung at him. His eyes blazed.

"Have a care—or you'll go before I mean you to, my lady," he hissed. "Walter McRae! Nothing can save him. Do you think I am not watching Sherwood—taking care of my own interests? Walter McRae will die a felon's death. After that—" he snapped his fingers.

"And I shall find room beside Helen Vernon," said Renie, quickly. "Your sleep will be troubled of nights, with such a long list to your credit."

"Helen Vernon!" he repeated, his brow lowering. Her shaft had struck home—he knew few peaceful nights. "No. Your end will not be like hers. Her life went out very easily—she never had much sand in her. But you—well, this old building will make a splendid funeral pyre."

In spite of her courage, Renie shivered.

"You will have us both to welcome you when you reach the other shore," she said then, dauntlessly.

"Unfortunately, or fortunately, I should say, I do not believe in another shore."

"We won't discuss it," said Renie. He looked at her in admiration.

"You are certainly a cool one," he said. "The finest I ever

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met. I wish I had more time." He threw back his head, laughing coarsely. " I would teach you to care for me, and then marry you."

" Please start the fire," said Renie. She braced herself up against the wall and folded her arms. The utter scorn in her face, far from nettling, seemed to please him highly.

" No," he said, " not yet. I should like to see Julian Sherwood accompany you. I shall wait a day or two—and I know you will not mind. The house is in a fine location—you can scream your lungs out and no one will hear you. I shall, however, guard against even possible escape, by tying your pretty hands together."

She struggled in vain. He drew her hands down behind her, and tied them securely. Then, taking the candle from the mantelpiece, he blew it out, left the room, carefully locking the door behind him. She heard his footsteps echo down the stairs, she heard the front door bang—then all was silence.

* * * * *

Mr. Sibbs, after much quiet questioning, discovered the boy who had brought the note to Miss Sherewode, but the lad could give him no news worth while. The man had been tall; his coat collar turned up high; his eyes were hidden by his hat, and he had a mustache. He had been standing at the cross-roads.

Mr. Sibbs made inquiries at the two livery stables—no horse or carriage had been hired from either of them—they had not seen any strange teams. He telephoned to the next town, to the one livery stable it contained. No rig had been out in a week. Satisfied that the girl had not been removed in that way, the detective went to the station-master. No lady or gentleman such as he described had been seen.

All this Sibbs managed to do before ten o'clock that night. Lorna was distracted. Mr. Vernon could not rest. Julian Sher-

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wood paced the floor like a madman. What would Walter say? What could he say to his friend who was waiting, even then, with bursting heart, for one glimpse of the girl he loved? What would he do if, just as he was sure of her, she was snatched from him like this?

"Oh, Renie is so good—no harm can come to her. Renie's God will save her," murmured Lorna, over and over. "Renie's Mother, that she prays to—oh, Mother of God, and Renie's Mother, save her, please save her!"

"She is somewhere in this place," said Sibbs. "The man has hidden her somewhere. I have no doubt but it is Davis himself—he has found out that she knows something, and he would remove her from his path. Mr. Van Dyke, the trial comes up the day after to-morrow. You will have to secure a stay in the proceedings until this girl is found. I shall stay here and find her."

"If he has killed her—" put in Mr. Vernon.

Not one could answer him. It seemed so easy for such a villain to add another crime to his long list. Mr. Vernon groaned aloud.

"Must we sit here idly, doing nothing, while she—"

"I can not," said Julian Sherwood. "Poor little girl, poor little girl! And Walter— Sibbs, tell us what we shall do—let us do something—anything. You say she is in the vicinity—hire some of the people round about and institute a search for her."

"Wait," said Sibbs. "Will you ask the clerk to come up again?"

Mr. Vernon obeyed. The man came at once. Mr. Sibbs gave him a keen glance, wondering how far he could trust him.

"Are you married?" he asked.

"I am," was the wondering reply.

"You have sisters, a wife, perhaps?"

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"Yes."

"Well, then, listen. You remember the young lady who left here to-night—the young lady who received the note?"

"Yes, sir."

"She has been enticed away; we can not find her. Now, look here, we want you to help us. We are tracing the crime that happened here two years ago, and this young lady was an important witness. It is for that reason she has been lured out of the house. We are satisfied that she is somewhere in the town, and we are convinced that if we are to do anything for her, it must be done quickly. Can you tell us of any likely place where she may have been hidden—a haunted house, or anything of that sort?"

The man hesitated, and pondered.

"There are a number of them," he said, at last.

"A number? Can you count them?"

"At least six."

"At least six. Could we reach them to-night?"

"All of them? Impossible. The nearest is four miles back in the woods; the farthest fully ten the other side of the town."

"H-m-m. If you were standing at the cross-roads and you wanted to reach the nearest old house you know of, which one would you go to?"

"The cross-roads?" he pondered. "The nearest would be on the same path six miles farther up."

"Teams pass it?"

"Yes—every day."

"It isn't the one. Think again."

The man sat silent, considering.

"There's an old abandoned, ramshackle hut—but no, I don't think any one knows that place. Only the old residents."

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"Now we are coming to something definite," said the detective, smiling a little. "What sort of a place is it?"

"Terrible—it has a bad reputation. Haunted and all that. Nothing but a broken-down shanty."

"The very spot," said Mr. Sibbs. "Go ahead."

"There is no road leading to it—one must beat one's way into it clear through the woods. Even then you can barely see it; you'd pass within ten feet of it, and not know it was there—"

"Do you know the house and the way?" asked the detective, rising.

"Yes, sir; I could find it."

"Are you willing to come now—this moment?"

"If you wish me to," said the man. "It will be a tough journey, though."

"You remember we are men, and trying to save a woman," put in Julian Sherwood.

"I have a wife and sisters—and a mother," said the man.

"Chivalry is the same, no matter what coat covers it," said Mr. Vernon, in an undertone.

"Duty, sir," put in the clerk, quickly. The others looked at him in surprise, not unmixed with admiration.

"We're glad to find you so ready," said Sibbs. "You will earn our gratitude, whether we discover her or not."

"Let us start now, at once," said Julian Sherwood. He was quivering with impatience.

"You will not be afraid to stay here alone, Lorna?" asked Mr. Vernon, anxiously.

"Mr. Sherwood will be enough to come, and Mr. Van Dyke—" said Sibbs.

"Van Dyke would bring on an attack of rheumatism," said

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Sherwood. " He's out of it—we can't afford to have our lawyer taken ill at this critical time."

"And I am not afraid," said Lorna. "Afraid, when maybe Renie's life depends on your going?" Her lips quivered. " No," she said. " I wish I could go with you—I wish that I could do something for her, who has been so good to me."

Julian Sherwood looked at the sweet face and earnest eyes, and wondered at the power careless, impulsive Renie Desmond had, to draw all hearts to her. He felt in entire sympathy with this girl now—he understood her sentiments, exactly. As for Walter McRae— Well, he would never forget the transfigured face of the haggard prisoner as he brought him the news that Renie had returned—that she was true—that she loved him. He had told him that news first of all, before raising his hopes by telling him the story she had related of the man upon the balcony. Not for worlds would he go to Walter McRae again and dash that cup of happiness from his lips. This would be impetus enough to urge him to daring efforts, even had not the girl herself attracted him. First, by her unlikeness to any one he had ever known, and then, by the heart that beat, so true and so brave, beneath the outer shell of indifference and carelessness.

It was a frightful journey—the journey those men made that night. The rain came down steadily—in a solid sheet. It rendered the roads almost impassable; they floundered through bog and mire, through mud and water to their knees. But not a word was said, save an occasional low-toned caution from the man who led them. It was midnight when they reached the hut, stumbling upon it blindly, it seemed to Julian Sherwood. He could scarcely see it. The detective drew his revolver from his pocket, telling Julian to do the same. The others, who were unarmed, he placed

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between them. Then, going up, he tried the door. It was locked, but the lock was old and broken, and soon gave way beneath his strong shoulder. Inside, Julian Sherwood whispered to him:

"Shall I strike a match?"

"No—if he is here it would serve to make us good targets. Ah—I have struck the stairs—follow me, softly."

But despite the caution the old stairs creaked under them. Mr. Vernon and the clerk guarded the foot; at the top they waited. They heard no sound.

"Let me call," said Sherwood. "This inaction, this indecision. is killing. Let me call—and if he is here— Well, we are four to one."

"Perhaps," said the detective, in a significant tone. "Call, if you like."

"Renie," said Julian, in a sharp voice, "Renie, are you here? It is Julian."

No sound.

"If she is here, she is dead of fright," said Julian.

"Try once more."

"Renie, Renie, Renie!"

This time something moved, something dragged itself along the floor of the room outside of which they stood.

"Who is there?"

"Renie!" cried Julian Sherwood, his excitement mastering him. He threw himself against the door—it would not yield. The detective came to his aid. Together they forced it, and it crashed open. The young man was beside himself. He had forgotten all and everything save that she had spoken. He groped around in the dark, stumbling at last over a prostrate figure, which, stooping, he lifted in his arms, holding her as if he could

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never let her go. For the moment he did not know what he was doing. The detective struck a match. He caught a glimpse of a white, tired face before the match died out.

"No more light," he said briefly. "Can you carry her downstairs?"

"Downstairs!" cried Julian Sherwood. The tears were streaming down his face. "God, God, how glad I am! I could carry her all the way home."

Renie never said a word, yielding, rather, to his clasp as he lifted her. When they reached the foot of the stairs, Mr. Vernon had his arms out ready for her, but Julian would not give her up.

"I can't," he said. "I can't. She's Walter's—poor Walter's. Oh, I thought she was lost to him forever. Speak to us, Renie, speak to us—tell us you are not injured, dear."

"No," said Renie, in a faint voice. "I am all right—only that my wrists hurt me. Will you see if you can get this rope off?"

It was Mr. Vernon's happy task to cut the rope that bound her.

"Is there any one else in the house?" asked Mr. Sibbs.

"No—he went away—oh, a long time ago. He intended to burn it—afterward, when he had brought Julian Sherwood here."

"My poor little girl," said Mr. Vernon, tenderly.

"I didn't mind much, after a while," said Renie. "I was not afraid." She put her lips to Julian's ear. "Tell me—has Walter—"

"He knows—he knows—he is waiting to see you—"

"Oh!" She struggled from his arms. "He does not mind—the other?"

"The other? What other?"

"That I am poor—"

"As if Walter would!" said Julian Sherwood. Truth to tell,

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he had forgotten to say a word of that to Walter, he had taken the other so joyously.

"I think you had better postpone that kind of conversation until you get home," said the detective, dryly. "I must say," he added, with a dash of humor, "that is not what one would expect from a young lady just rescued from a night in a ruin—and possible death."

"I was not afraid," said Renie. "But whoever you are, you know I must be grateful."

"Why did you not answer when I called at first?" asked Julian.

"I was asleep," said Renie.

"You have a clear conscience," said Mr. Sibbs.

"Yes," said Renie.

"There is a long road before you now—a nasty road. Do you think you can stand it?" he asked. "Two hours of as nasty plodding as I've ever struck."

"You did not mind the plodding to get here for me—it would be a poor return if I could not face the return trip bravely," said Renie.

They held a brief consultation on the stairs. They were cold and wet, and fagged out, but a daring scheme had entered the detective's brain.

"If any one will stay here with me," he said, "the fellow will be coming back in the morning, probably, and we'll be able to nab him. What do you say?"

"Gladly," said Julian Sherwood. "I will gladly stay."

Mr. Vernon put out his hand.

"May I protest against that?" he asked. "I am not so young as Mr. Sherwood, but I am strong. My cause of grievance

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against this man is very great. Will you permit me to stay and have a hand in his capture?"

Julian Sherwood was inclined to remonstrate—but the older man put down his objection firmly.

"If it is agreeable to Mr. Sibbs," he said, "I will stay. It is my right."

"Yes," said Sibbs. "You will probably be able, in the surprise of the moment, to wring a confession from him. Mr. Sherwood, you will leave us now and take the young lady home. Our path is mapped out for us."

"And to-morrow? Shall we come to-morrow?"

"Some one had better come if we have not returned at nightfall. Who knows what may happen?"

So he and Mr. Vernon went back to keep night vigil on the stairs, while Renie and Julian and the clerk set out on their difficult journey toward the hotel.

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CHAPTER XVII.

JASON SHERWOOD AGAIN.

"JULIAN," said Renie, the next morning—it had been "Julian" and "Renie" since the night before—"Mr. Van Dyke goes back to the city in a short while. He is to see Walter. Julian, I am going with him."

"Renie," said Julian, with a quizzical smile, "I can assure you that I don't envy Walter the future task of taking care of you. You are certainly the most irresponsible young person I ever met. In fact, I think you are mildly mad."

Renie frowned at him. She was quite pale from her terrible adventure, and her bruised wrists were bandaged.

"You will, however, listen to reason now. When Mr. Sibbs comes back with our man, as I am sure he will, he may need you to identify him. What shall I say to him? Tell him the young lady is in New York?"

"He won't need me at all," said Renie, in a restless tone. "Mr. Vernon will be able to identify him—"

"Supposing—something should happen either one? Mr. Vernon, for instance? Would you like to be away from Lorna and from him—in that event?"

She looked at him, startled.

"But, surely, no danger— You have been telling us all along —Lorna and me—that there was no possible danger."

"Of course I have. I daresay there isn't. Yet plans have gone astray before now."

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"You know I would not go if they needed me," protested Renie. "You surely know that?" She came to him then, putting her hand on his arm. "To-morrow, then, if all goes well? Take me yourself to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, if all goes well, we shall start together—every one of us. Possibly to-day. And you shall see Walter—at once. I promise you."

"When will he be released?"

"Everything depends on Sibbs carrying out his plans. If Davis is captured returning to fire the house, it will be a very strong point. The case is practically cleared up as far as Walter is concerned. But you," he said, breaking off abruptly, "are you not exhausted after last night? You should need medical care, instead of thinking to start on a six-hour journey. Abducted, imprisoned, frightened almost to death; rescued and subjected to a four-mile walk over the worst of country roads in the pouring rain—why, you are a marvel."

"That is nothing," said Renie, stoutly. "I *was* frightened, I admit. But not because I was alone. The moment he left the house, and I heard him go, my courage came back. I had fully made up my mind to die; prepared myself, and fell asleep while examining my conscience. The next thing I heard was your voice. I thought I was dreaming—I could not believe it."

"And we were in agony because we feared that the strain would kill you. Well," said Julian Sherwood, "what would I be able to say to Walter?"

"I did not worry," said Renie, "not even about that." She smiled at him. "God takes care of some things, and if I were to die before I saw him, it would be a punishment for my irresolution in the past."

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"You are not usually selfish."

"Selfish?"

"You are thinking of yourself alone. Has not Walter suffered enough?"

She hesitated.

"Forgive me, if I tell you that I can't realize Walter's feeling toward me," she began, slowly. "It is a whole year ago, you remember? That is why I am so anxious to see him, to hear him talk; to read his face, his eyes, his heart, his soul; to find out what part in his life Renie Desmond is to take. Perhaps his memory of me is not like what I am now. There are so many things that could happen. People are different; one's ideas change daily—see how different I am to what I was a year ago. And Walter—"

"Was a sorrowful, melancholy man, whose face has aged ten years; whose hair is white; whose lips are set in despondent curves. There was no light, no hope for him until I brought your message. Renie Desmond, I pray that you will deserve his loyalty."

She looked at this true friend with shining eyes.

"You are—splendid," she said, with a quick breath. "Pray that always. I shall be so glad to love him."

Lorna came into the room with great excitement on her face just then.

"Renie! Mr. Sherwood! I think papa and the other gentleman are coming; and there is some one else with them—"

"Come on," said Julian Sherwood. "Where is Mr. Van Dyke?"

"Downstairs," said Lorna. She was following him when she saw that Renie had not moved, and so she returned and put her arms about her, with the gentle affectionateness that was part of her own sweet self.

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"You do not want to see the wicked creature who has brought such misery and unhappiness on us all, do you?" she asked. "Poor Renie!"

"No," said Renie. "Dear Lorna—he has brought much misery—more misery than you can have any conception of. Will you put on your hat and come with me? I have a little story I would like to tell you."

For Mr. Vernon had given over into Renie's hands the sad task of telling Lorna of her sister's death, knowing that she must hear it in the end, and that much more harshly than Renie would break it to her. With her arm about her little friend, Renie left the house. She had no wish to look upon Davis' face again. She saw Sibbs at the door. He started forward when his eyes rested on her.

"You have him?" she asked. "You will probably not recognize me, but I am the young lady you rescued last night—this morning, rather. Permit me to thank you, sir."

She gave him her hand.

"It's all in the day's work," he said, in answer to her smile. "Yes, we got him—by Jove, but he did fight, though! Never have I had a more savage or desperate fellow! Only for the nippers I couldn't have managed him at all. The sight of Mr. Vernon seemed to set him mad. But it's all right."

"My father?" asked Lorna, timidly—her face had gone quite pale.

"He's very much pleased at the capture—you'll see him in a little while," responded Mr. Sibbs. "You won't go wandering off anywhere now, you young ladies? I believe there's a train for New York in two hours."

"Thank God!" said Renie. "I shall be glad to see the city.

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We are not going very far now. Tell Mr. Vernon we will be back shortly, if he makes inquiries. You are sure he's all right? "

"A little tired—we watched in turn," said Mr. Sibbs. " But you'll hear the story later. Van Dyke and Sherwood are with him now, as Van Dyke wants to get away immediately. It's my business to get that chap into a cell as quick as I can manage it."

Renie bowed and went on. They took the road that Mr. Vernon had traversed the night before. The rain had ceased; the sun was shining; the trees were clad in glossy green—the tender green of spring.

" Let us forget about that wicked creature," said Renie, " although I am going to tell you something that will make you sorry, too, dear. It is just a little story—but it is sad."

" Do not tell me if it pains you, Renie," said the girl.

" It will pain me, dear—but I would rather tell it."

She walked in silence for a while, her head bent, her eyes upon the ground.

" Once upon a time," she said; " once upon a time there was a dear, sweet girl—just like you. She had been brought up very carefully, and every one loved her. She was so good and so tender-hearted and affectionate and lovely that no one could help caring for her.

" By-and-by, when she was a young lady, a man came to her. He was different to anybody she had ever known. He said he adored her. He told her again and again of his affection. He told her that only she could help to make him better—that he would be a good man if she married him.

" Well, she did marry him."

" Is this Helen's story? " asked Lorna, in a low voice. "Are you telling me Helen's story? "

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"It is like Helen's story, isn't it, dear? But do not interrupt me. She married him—and she was happy for a while, even though she had given up everything for him; he simply lavished attention upon her. But he couldn't change his nature. He didn't *want* to be good. In a few months she saw this. She saw that he was wicked, and cruel, too, although we will not say he had been cruel to her. But it is awful for a lovely, good girl to be the wife of a bad man; don't you think that would be a terrible fate for any good girl, Lorna?"

"Yes," said Lorna.

"When she became convinced of his unworthiness, her heart was broken, dear. There was nothing worth while after she found out how wicked and mean he was. She wanted to die. He used to go away from her. At first for a short while, then for months at a time. And he used to quarrel. He brought her to some place where they were little known—where no one knew or noticed them. At last one day she upbraided him and he sprang at her; she fell and struck her temple."

"She—she died—" came from Lorna now, in a tone that was almost a wail.

"Wait—wait. I wonder, if it had been you, would you want to live?" said Renie, tenderly. "She had been so good and so true always, dear. Her life was ruined. She had left all for him, and he had proved unworthy. Think, Lorna, dear, when she fell so, and there was choice of death—would not you have been glad to die?"

Lorna did not answer.

"Supposing, in a short while, he began to beat her and to neglect her; supposing he dragged her down, so that she was no longer the high-minded, noble girl she had been, but a creature

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like himself. Don't you think death was better then? If it were you, Lorna—"

"If it were I, yes, Renie. But it was not I."

Renie had said enough. She had not told the ghastly truth—that would come afterward; but she had brought to the girl the knowledge of her sister's death. They threaded their way in and out among the mounds until they reached the plain white shaft that had witnessed the sorrow of a bereaved man the night before. Standing before it, Renie clasped her arms tightly about Lorna, and brought the pale face close to her breast.

"Let me be your Helen, dear," she said, in a broken voice. "Let me be your Helen, while this other Helen sleeps in peace, where neither earth's joys nor sorrows can come to her again. Yes, Lorna, dearest, I have told you Helen's story, and Helen is lying here."

* * * * *

That afternoon a singular party boarded the train for New York City. Two girls, both beautiful and both very sad; an elderly gentleman, whose face showed plainly that grief had worked its will upon him; a young man, pleasant and courteous—and another keen-eyed gentleman, quick and alert in his movements. The last of the party resembled an animal in the sullen fury that was the chief expression of his countenance. He was guarded carefully by the two younger men. The young ladies and the elderly gentleman went into the forward car, while the others took one of the rear ones. The man they guarded was handcuffed to the detective—they knew they could not trust him.

Van Dyke had gone out to the city on the early train. Alfred Davis had so plainly betrayed himself to Renie, and to Mr. Vernon when he saw him, that Sibbs and the lawyer were sure he would

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break down under a cross-examination, if he would not voluntarily make confession of his crimes before that. Lorna sat bowed under her new sorrow, and Mr. Vernon's grief was augmented, for he felt that his girl was suffering. Renie was very tender and gentle with them both, saying little, since she saw that silence was best; absorbed in them, too, to the forgetfulness of self.

Two special detectives met Sibbs and his prisoner at the station, and the four entered a cab and were driven at once to the jail—for Sibbs would not permit the man to leave his sight until assured that the prison walls held him safe and sound. Julian was thus enabled to return to Mr. Vernon and the two girls, and to go with them to the hotel. As he wrote his name in the register, he turned to Renie with a smile.

"My father is stopping here," he said. "I shall be glad to have you meet him. And I know he will be delighted."

A little later Mr. Jason Sherwood met Miss Desmond Sherewode in the hotel parlor. He held her hand, looking at her with kindly eyes.

"So you are the Miss Sherewode my son mentioned to me some time ago," he asked. "How did you come by the name?"

"A friend loaned it to me," said Renie, briefly. "I used it while I needed it. But now I no longer need it, and I am glad to be just plain Renie Desmond, a nobody from nobody knows where."

"Is that so?" His eyes twinkled. "I had better not tell you the news I have for you, then. Are you aware that I have four different newspaper advertisements in my pocket, describing one Renie Desmond, and asking her to communicate with me—that she would hear of something to her advantage, etc., etc."

Renie opened her eyes at him.

"What can you possibly know of advantage to me?" she asked.

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"A little," he said. "Two days ago, by merest chance, I was settling the claim of an old piece of Sherwood property in Broadplains, and, in doing so, had to go over some of my brother's papers. Among them, what do you think I found?"

Again Renie shrugged her shoulders.

"A will, dated eighteen years ago—when you were about two years old, my dear—leaving almost a quarter of his property to little Renie Desmond, daughter of Katharine Percy and Mark Desmond."

He waited to see the effect of his words upon her, but she did not understand him.

"Your father and mother, child!" he said, impatiently.

"My father and mother! Oh, no!" cried Renie. "Lorna, are you listening, Lorna? My father and mother!"

The younger girl was indeed listening, with cheeks reddened from excitement. Mr. Vernon, too, had forgotten his sorrow for the moment, as he bent forward with eager ears.

"You told me how Maria Sherwood had always hated you," said Jason Sherwood. "There was a reason for her hatred. She had parted my brother and his sweetheart, Katharine Percy. She had lied back and forth between them, until Katharine, who was, I judge, very determined and haughty and self-willed—not at all like you, Miss Renie!—married Mark Desmond, her devoted swain. And made him a fine wife, too, from all I know of them, although they did not have much good luck, it seems. Your father died shortly after you were born. Austin Sherwood was married by this time, and his wife's bitter temper showed him a good many things. Unfortunately, she told him of her perfidy one day, and he determined that at least you should not be penniless. Your mother died next, and while Austin, my brother, could not bring you to his

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home, he saw that you were taken care of. On his death Mrs. Sherwood sent word to have you removed to an institution; some years later she conceived the plan of taking you to Broadplains. This she managed easily enough."

"But how do you come to find this out now?" asked Renie, breathlessly.

"The papers were hidden carefully in the old house, which, by the way, I have not sold, and which I have no right to. Austin left it to you. I do not think Maria Sherwood knew of the existence of this will. It is certain that she would have destroyed it if she did. She was unscrupulous enough."

"Intuition was right, after all, wasn't it?" put in Julian Sherwood, with a smile.

"You are quite a wealthy young woman," continued Jason Sherwood, "and I am happy to be the first one to welcome you to your own."

"A real father and mother!" said Renie, in a dazed way. "I think I never knew how sorry I was not to have them until now. Oh, I am so glad. Did you know—her?" she asked, wistfully.

"I knew her slightly," said Jason Sherwood.

"Oh! Then you can tell me how she looked, perhaps?"

"Wait," said Jason Sherwood. "She had eyes like pools of dark-gray water, touched with silver; she had chestnut hair; she had a round face, with a dimple in either cheek; a saucy chin and an upturned nose—"

"Why, you are looking at Renie, father," said Julian. "That isn't fair."

"I am describing Katharine Percy," said his father, gravely, "and I wonder at my former blindness. I should have known the reason why your face haunted me—that I could not get it out of

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my mind. Marie Sherwood must have known it, too. Hence her hatred."

"A real father and mother!" said Renie Desmond, in an ecstasy of delight.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE END.

WALTER MCRAE would not allow Renie to visit him in the prison, seeing that his immediate release was assured. The next morning, when Davis was taken from his cell, his pugnacity and boldness had left him. He admitted his guilt, telling in detail of the murder of his wife—details which we shall not enter into—"because she annoyed him," and of placing in the locket she wore about her neck the picture of his enemy. He had done this, planning every bit of what followed, the place in which the body was found, etc., with the hope that the man he hated might be suspected and accused of the crime. He told of his visits to Mrs. McRae, and acknowledged that he had given her the powder. He had not meant it for her. He knew that she was insane, and he had advised her to give it secretly to Walter, under pretense of ridding herself of him forever.

All this he told with such bravado, such evident delight in the rehearsal, that the court was shocked. Walter McRae was immediately discharged, and left the place of his long incarceration a free man. Davis was taken back to prison, assured of a swift and speedy sentence.

The man who had so nearly paid the penalty of another's crime had lost a great deal in the past fifteen months. His hair was indeed thickly threaded with gray, his eyes sunken, his face very pale. Yet the strength and the earnestness and the courage were there. He would have met death with the fortitude that

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carried him over every trial. He, too, was changed. Not fretful or narrow, although more melancholy than of old. A noble man, whom a woman could well trust.

Julian Sherwood did not open his lips once to him during that short drive home to the hotel. At the door he left him.

"And you?" asked Walter. "Where are you going?"

"Oh, I shall solace myself with Miss Lorna, whom I observed peeping out of the parlor window at you. Go in, now. Man alive, the girl is waiting."

She was—standing in the center of the room, with her hands extended toward him, tears in her eyes, a smile upon her lips. He took her in his arms tenderly and kissed her.

"It is worth while," he said then. "It is worth it all—this moment is worth it all."

Her hands tightened about his neck—nor could Renie Desmond speak. She had been, she said, a bird of passage. As soon as she reached her rightful home, she would be at rest—she would find her real self. Her real self was here, now, with Walter McRae's arms about her. There was no more doubt, no further hesitation. Here was the man she loved—the man who loved her.

An hour later Julian Sherwood entered, with Lorna following him.

"When are you going to be married?" asked the first-named, mischievously, after Walter and Lorna had been made acquainted.

"To-morrow," said Walter McRae, promptly.

"I really believe you would, if you could," said Julian.

"You can believe it—for we shall," said Walter. "I'm going to get some one to vouch for us—that we are eligible and free, and all that, to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony, and we shall be married at eight o'clock Mass to-morrow morning—if we can

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persuade our good Father Watson, who knows me well, to our way of thinking."

"Is it true, Renie?" asked Lorna.

"Yes," said Renie, with a smile, "it is true."

"I can only say that your marriage is in keeping with the rest of your life," said Julian. "May Miss Lorna and I invite ourselves to be best lady and best man?"

"Of course—you know I want you," said Walter McRae, "and I think Renie would scarcely ask for any other but Miss Lorna."

"It seems too bad we can not follow your example," said Julian Sherwood, thoughtfully.

A great light broke over Renie's face.

"Why, how *delightful!*" she cried. She looked at Lorna, who stood bewildered at the daring of this speech. "If I am not *stupid!*" she said. "I never thought of that."

* * * * *

"I want to tell you something, Renie," said Lorna that night. "I am going to become a Catholic."

"You are?" cried Renie. "Lorna, I think that Our Lord has been saving everything lovely for me, to give it to me all in a heap. And I don't deserve a bit of it. A father and mother, and Walter, and now *you!* Oh, Lorna, I am too happy."

"I asked God, the night you were taken away, to bring you home again, safe and sound, and to give me news of Helen. I asked God—and then I asked His Mother, Renie, honestly. For the first time in my life I went to her—I never knew of her or thought of her until I met you. See how good she was to me! I want to belong to her now and to the creed that will give her to me."

Renie threw her arms about her and kissed her.

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"You love!" she said. "No wonder Julian Sherwood thinks that you—"

"Hush, hush," said Lorna. "You mustn't talk like that. I can never leave my father, Renie, never. He has only one girl left him, dear, now that you, too, are going."

"You will not have to leave him—Julian will arrange that."

"So you are tired of your freedom, Miss Renie Desmond?" said Jason Sherwood, a little later. "You are in a great hurry to put the yoke upon yourself now, I hear. To-morrow morning! That is a speedy wedding, indeed!"

"My only bondage was my own self-will," said Renie, with a sweet and serious face. "I—tired of it, Mr. Sherwood. I think I have tasted the only freedom that one knows who was placed as I have been—the freedom to be unhappy."

"And you—are you happy now, little girl?" He spoke tenderly.

She looked from him to Walter McRae's shining face, as he advanced toward her across the floor. Then she glanced back at him again.

"I am answered," he said.

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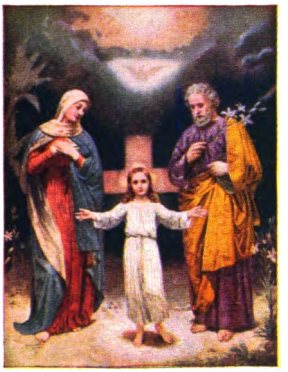
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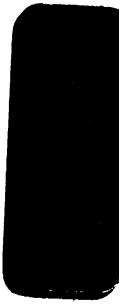
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